Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

Over the past nearly twenty five years, it was my privilege to spend five Holy Weeks doing mission work, teaching, and preaching in the Anglican Church in South Africa. There the Easter Vigil is commonly done on Easter Sunday Morning at 5, 5:30, or 6 a.m. The lighting of the New Fire of Easter generally happens outside the church very shortly before dawn, with worship beginning in the very real dark and with the service ending in the full light of day. Those very early services did involve getting up very early, but my spiritual and emotional response to those Easter Vigil services was very positive. In some strange way, those services also brought back memories from deep in my childhood when I attended Protestant and Ecumenical Easter Sunrise Services, including a glorious one with my maternal Grandparents at an amazing outdoor location near Rindge, New Hampshire called “The Cathedral in the Pines.”

The New Light of Easter Morning resonates so well with the New Light Embodies by the Risen Christ who is in fact the Light of the World – who in fact shines brightness and hope into even the darkest recesses of our lives, our world, and our very souls.

Almost at the beginning of this service, the ancient hymn, the Exsultet, which was sung very ably by a member of our choir, gets the true meaning of Easter right:

“Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and choirs of angels, and let your trumpets shout salvation for the victory of our mighty King.

“Rejoice now, heavenly hosts and sing now, all the round earth, bright with a glorious splendor, for darkness has been vanquished by our Eternal King.

“Rejoice and be glad now, Mother Church, and let your holy courts, in radiant light resound with the praises of your people.

GLORIOUS SPLENDOR! RADIANT LIGHT! DARKNESS VANQUISHED! THE VICTORY OF OUR GOD! That is what Easter is all about.

The Exsultet goes on:
“All you who stand near this marvelous holy flame, pray with me to God the Almighty for the grace to sing the worthy praise of this great light; through Jesus Christ his Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.

I have to interject that the New Fire – the New Light of Easter – should really be more like a football rally bonfire, than the simple spark of a battery powered candle lighter or the simple match borrowed from one of the last remaining smokers in the parish, which is what is more usually the case in the parishes I have known in the United States. Those who “stand near this marvelous and holy flame,” as the Exsultet puts it, should not only see the brightness, they should even feel the heat – because that light and that heat symbolizes the power of the One who rose again on Easter, and who has and has had the power to change and transform our lives, our souls, our world, and its history for all time. (I could tell you the story about the congregation which nearly burned down its church with its very hot new fire of Easter, but I will save that for another year!)
A little later the Exsultet goes on:
“This is the night, when you brought our fathers and mothers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.

In a very real sense we are reminded that in the same way that God led the people of Israel through the Red Sea waters and left a life of slavery behind them, that same God, through the Resurrected Jesus Christ, leads us from the bonds of sin, death, and hell and into a more abundant life of light, love and forgiveness, both this side of the grave and the next.

Still later in the Exsultet, we hear:
“This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.

Each year when I hear these words, I find myself musing on the question of how many of us may be reluctant to let go of the gloom of sin in our lives. For some reason, we cling to anger, rage, depression, despair, guilt, shame and other emotions which tend to block the light and the love of Jesus Christ from entering our very selves and souls. Perhaps we feel an almost perverse call to be a suffering servant. Perhaps we really do enjoy ill health. Perhaps we find fulfillment in our anger, rage, and perpetual negativity. Perhaps we never met a grudge that we did not embrace warmly and cling to closely. Perhaps, like was the case with my father, the glass is never half full, or half empty, but always broken and leaking rapidly. But it was and is the Risen Christ’s intention to deliver us from the gloom of sin and to restore us to grace and holiness of life.

The Exsultet goes on:
“This is the night, when Christ broke the bonds of death and hell, and rose victorious from the grave.”


This is not some simple celebration of springtime.

This is not some festival of miniature farm animals which actually make very poor pets for small children – or adults for that matter.

This is not some cholesterol sated banquet of ham, eggs, and chocolate.

This is in fact a glorious celebration of the fact that God’s light has and always will triumph over all darkness.

This is a profound proclamation that Christ has once and for all overcome the powers of sin, death, and Hell.

This is a night when we can be assured that even as Christ rose to life again after the most humiliating of deaths, he offers to each of us hope, reconciliation, and new beginnings even in our darkest of hours.

To reiterate yet other words from the Exsultet:

“How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. It restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn, it casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.”

If only we can embrace the hope and the promise of such a glorious proclamation.
Yes, each year, Easter offers each of us a new beginning, a fresh start, an invitation to turn over a new leaf – to start a new page in the book of life. Our sins are washed away – our innocence has been restored. We have a new opportunity to seek peace and concord, not only for ourselves, not only for this church, but also for those we love and for the communities and nations in which we dwell, and even for those who may seem far away due to absence, illness, addiction, serious mental illness, estrangement, incarceration, or dementia.

“How blessed is the night when heaven and earth are joined and humanity is reconciled with God.”

Whatever may have separated us human beings from God – whether it was in the Garden of Eden – in the course of salvation history – during the history of the Christian Church – or even in our own individuals journeys of faith and life – the good news of Easter – the good News at Easter – is that we are and have been reconciled with God - we begin our journeys – our pilgrimages anew – at one with God!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen.