

Homily for the Easter Vigil, Year C

April 19, 2025

St. Bavo Parish

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Genesis 1:1-2:2 (The story of Creation.)

Exodus 14:15-15:1 (The Israelites cross the Red Sea.)

Ezekiel 36:16-28 (I will give you a new heart and a new spirit.)

Romans 6:3-11 (We who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.)

Luke 24:1-12 (He is not here, but he has been raised.)

The Old Testament readings tonight took us on a breathless sprint through salvation history, pausing to reflect on key moments in that journey which have special significance for believers of every generation.

We began with the story of Creation in Genesis chapter 1. Though this reworked version of an ancient pagan myth is both pre-scientific and pre-historical, nevertheless, it presents profound *theological insights* about the goodness of all Creation and the special relationship between God and the human race. In the beginning there was only God; nothing else existed. Then, by the almighty *Word* of God, all things came into being. Among all the living creatures that populate the earth, we are the only species created in the divine image and blessed with the knowledge of our Creator. And, through the incarnation of that same divine Word by which all things were created, we have been granted a share in divine life.

The next story that we heard comes from the narrative at the very heart of Jewish religious history: the Exodus from Egypt. And the particular story that we heard tonight has special significance for *Christians*, because of its symbolic connection with Baptism. The Israelites had already escaped from Egypt and were several days into their journey toward the Promised Land, but they were still within striking distance of the Egyptian army and its war chariots. It was not until the Israelites *passed through the waters* of the Red Sea that they were truly free. Christians see this passage from slavery to freedom by means of water to be a symbol of Baptism. Before Christ, all human beings were enslaved to sin and death, and there was no escape. Now, through the sacrament of Baptism, we *pass through the waters* and emerge as a new creation, sons and daughters of God, reborn into freedom, with God's promise of salvation and eternal life.

The third story tonight comes from the *darkest* time in Jewish history: the Exile in Babylon. Despite their covenant with God, the Chosen People had lost everything. The Jewish monarchy, descended from King David, had come to an end. The great Temple in Jerusalem, their one place for sacrifice and worship, was destroyed. The people were scattered or enslaved. There was nothing left, *except* the faithfulness of the God who once called them to be his holy people. *For the sake of his holy name*, God promises not just to restore what was lost, but to cleanse his people of their sin, to give them a new heart, to place a new spirit within them, and to reclaim them as his own possession. We Christians see this promise fulfilled in *Baptism*. For, through the Sacrament, God cleanses us of our impurities, creates a new heart within us, gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit, and claims us as his own sons and daughters.

Moreover, as St. Paul reminds us in his Letter to the Romans, through Baptism we have *died* with Christ, in order to rise with him. Paul says that “Christ, raised from the dead, dies no more; death no longer has power over him.” We believe that the same is true of us, who have been baptized into his death. Death no longer has power over *us*, either. We belong to Christ now, and he has *all power* over life and death.

Ironically, Christ received his sovereignty over death by *submitting* to it. As the Scriptures foretold, the Son of Man had to be handed over to sinners and crucified, and rise on the third day. Jesus tried to explain this to his disciples *before* his death, but they could not understand. So, when the women found the tomb empty early Sunday morning, they were puzzled at first. Then, they were terrified at the sight of the two angels, who asked them, “Why do you seek the living one among the dead?” But then, when the angels reminded them of what Jesus had said, they remembered and finally understood and *believed*. Peter, it seems, needed to see the empty tomb for himself. Then he, too, “went home amazed at what had happened.” For the other disciples, Jesus had to appear in the flesh, even eating a piece of fish to prove that he was really alive. Then he personally explained all that the Scriptures had prophesied about him, and they also came to believe.

We can forgive those first disciples for being overwhelmed by the mystery of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In fact, I dare say we should pray for the grace to be a little bit *more* overwhelmed by it ourselves. We can easily take our salvation for granted. That’s why we are so blessed tonight to come together to celebrate this great Easter Vigil. Our liturgy began with the light of the Paschal Candle piercing the darkness of the church, symbolizing the Light of Christ, which overcomes the darkness of our world. Then, the uniquely extended Liturgy of the Word, unlike what we hear at any other Mass, reminded us of all that God has done for his people throughout history, and especially what God has accomplished for us through the death and resurrection of Christ. Next, we will celebrate the Liturgy of Baptism, in which four members of our community will be made a new creation by water and the Holy Spirit. We, too, will renew our baptismal promises and recommit ourselves to the covenant that Christ initiated by his own blood. As we are blessed with the waters of this font, may we be reinvigorated to “put on Christ” every day of our lives and allow his light to shine forth through us. May our every word and action cry out, “Alleluia, he is risen!” and his Spirit lives *in me*.