

**A sermon preached by the Rev. Anne Slakey  
Saturday, April 5, 2026 — The Great Vigil of Easter  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Sacramento**

The World is in need of a reset button. I find it hard to wrap my mind around what is going on in Israel and the rest of the Middle East, let alone Ukraine and elsewhere. Missiles are being fired, from the Holy Land, and at the Holy Land. They leave lines crisscrossing the sky, and those lines trace a long history of religious strife, a history where Christians played a prominent role. Unfortunately, we can't just unplug for a few minutes, and then plug back in. We live in the world we have made, and can only change it with God's help.

Still, I am convinced that Easter can be a reset for us. I think that the very best way to experience that reset is the Easter Vigil. We need to hear the majesty and the hope of the Old Testament readings, and the confirmation of that hope in Paul and the Easter Gospel. We need to reaffirm our Baptisms, turning our lives towards God once again. We need to join in the Lamb's High Feast, Easter Communion. Joy and hope fill us again, and we carry Easter out to a hurting world.

Even though it is afternoon, the Vigil begins in darkness. First, we heard the story of Creation. The central moment is the start of the first day. I imagine the waters of chaos, choppy and confused in a grey darkness, then a flash of light filling the world as God says "Let there be light." There at the dawn of creation, God separates light from darkness and creates Day and Night. The rest of the reading calls to mind the underlying order of God's creation, and our belief that no matter what humanity gets up to, Creation and even the humans in it, are Good.

Second, we hear how God rescues Israel from bondage. Again, we start in darkness. The Israelites are fleeing on foot through the night, but they can hear chariots catching up to them. Moses promises "The Egyptians you see today you will never see again." He parts the Red Sea, and, still in darkness, Israel passes through it on dry ground. The Egyptians follow them into the sea, but as morning comes, God looks down, and throws them into confusion. When the sun rises, they try to

turn around, but Moses releases the waters and they return, swallowing the Egyptians up. This passage through the sea becomes the metaphor for all the ways God rescues us and leads us someplace new.

Finally we have a new metaphor for the remade human person. Ezekiel has been warning Israel that in the despair of exile they are adopting idolatrous foreign ways. Their hearts, like Pharaoh's, have been hardened into hearts of stone. But, he promises, God will give them hearts of flesh, and write his laws there, remaking them from the inside out through his Spirit. The new heart is a spiritual reset.

Before I get to the Gospel, I want to share with you my own journey through a dark night into Easter Dawn, and a reset to hope. Its why I trust in the power of the Vigil. Way back in the early 80s, I was a sophomore in college in Santa Fe, and let's just say I was experimenting with everything available back then. But I wasn't happy. I was feeling a pull towards God, and started going to church again, but I didn't feel worthy to receive communion.

When Easter came, I decided to go on the annual pilgrimage out to Christ in the Desert Benedictine Monastery. I got up at midnight, rode about an hour and a half in the dark in an old school bus, then bumped and slid thirteen miles up a dirt road into the Chama River Canyon. I think we arrived around 2 or three in the morning. The Church had a bank of tall windows, and you could see a few stars in the sky. So we sat in the dark and listened to all 10 lessons with their 10 Psalms. Gradually, the sky lightened, and finally it was light enough so I could see the Canyon walls. As the New Testament readings began, the sun rose. Light hit the top of the canyon wall first, then moved down, lighting the rock with a golden glow. It was an unforgettable sunrise.

We were sprinkled with water during the Creed, but Grace really started to flow with the Eucharistic prayer. I found myself crying, but very gently, tears washing down my face, cleaning me from the inside out. At communion, I knew it was time for me to go forward and receive.

I looked up their website, and saw this comment. "On behalf of all people but especially those who are separated from God, the monks of

this monastery endeavor to hold all in need before the God of Holiness, asking for mercy and healing.” You know what? It worked for me, and I’m forever grateful for that Easter Day and those prayers. And I’m glad that at St. Paul’s healing prayer is also available for those in need. It works here too.

Just like the children of Israel in the desert, there were struggles before me. It took a while to quit all my rough and rowdy ways. But there were Egyptians I never saw again. I never again doubted God’s grace.

Our Episcopal service gives us those same opportunities to reconnect with God’s grace. We reconnect with the faith of our Baptism, and renew our promises to pray, repent, love and serve. We are brought to the Easter table, the Paschal Feast, sharing in Christ’s body and blood. It is a sunrise of the soul, a new day of grace dawning for us, a reset into hope.

Let me close with the sunrise that makes it all possible, the Day of Resurrection.

Matthew points back to Genesis. The Sabbath has ended, it is the first day of the week, the day light was created. Just as dawn is breaking, the two Marys come to the tomb. The earth shakes, and an angel rolls the rock away from the tomb.

Seeing the women’s terror, the angel tells them not to be afraid. They should look at the tomb, confirm Christ is not there, and then go tell the disciples that Christ will meet them in Galilee. The morning light is stronger now. The women can see into the empty tomb, and see their way clearly enough to run with their news.

Suddenly, they see Jesus, who greets them. It is now full day. Jesus tells them not to be afraid, and repeats that the disciples must go to Galilee. The women hold onto his feet, and rejoice in his presence and his light.

That Easter Day, long ago, I was blessed to be like the two Marys. Christ was present to me in mercy and grace. But there have certainly been years when I was more like the Disciples, and only found Christ after going to Galilee. Christ becomes present to each of us in the way

that is best for us. Like the two Mary's, I share my Easter story only so that others may hear and rejoice with me in the real presence of the Risen Lord.

Easter is truly a reset for us believers, whether we feel it or not. Hope is reborn, and we remember that chaos and darkness are not the end of the story. Christ has returned, bringing order and light and hope.

Alleluia. The Lord is Risen. (The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia)