

The Easter Vigil, also called the Paschal Vigil or the Great Vigil of Easter, is the first official celebration of Christ's resurrection. Frequently, it is during this service that people are baptized and that adult catechumens are received into full communion with the Church. It is held in the hours of darkness between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter Day-- most commonly in the evening of Holy Saturday. During the Vigil we get our first glimpse of hope. From the darkness of Good Friday there bursts forth light from our Savior's empty tomb. From nothing there comes everything!

In Isaiah 40-55, Zion undergoes the same experience; she goes from darkness to light, from death to life. Our text puts it this way: "For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you" (Isaiah 54:7).

Zion stands for sixth century BC Israelites who are exiled in Babylon. Standing as a symbol and cypher for God's people, we are told in Isaiah 54 that Zion had no children, no family, and no husband. Her city had been destroyed, her cupboards were bare, and her hopes were diminished. She had absolutely nothing.

This sorry state of affairs is not confined to Zion. It is all around us. "Complete nothingness," cries the Preacher of Ecclesiastes (1:2). Paul agrees, "All have turned away; they have together become worthless"

(Romans 3:12). And Shakespeare adds this famous line, “[Life] is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.”(Macbeth) Every passing year is marked with bombs, bloodshed, and brokenness; death, decay, and destruction; more tears, terror, and trauma.

Nothing. It is all around us. Nothing. It is also in us. First Corinthians 13:2 states, “If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing.” Are you still unconvinced? Hear what John writes in Revelation 3:17, “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.” To a person, we are just a little bit of nothing.

Enter the Lord, the Husband, the Maker, the Holy One, the Restorer, the God of all the earth. His Servant Jesus performed His first miracle when partygoers looked at their supply of wine and saw nothing. Then there was the widow at Nain, the daughter of Jairus, blind Bartimaeus, the Canaanite woman, Zacchaeus, Mary Magdalene, Lazarus, and the familiar words, “We have here only five loaves of bread and two fish. What are they?” (John 6:9). The Servant, “being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing” (Philippians 2:6-7). Paul goes on, “He humbled Himself and became obedient to death,

even death on a cross” (v. 8). Even the best Manhattan advertising agencies would be hard pressed for a catchy jingle. “Lose it all. Become nothing. Imagine the possibilities!”

Omnipotent, He cries. The owner of all things, He says, “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay His head” (Matthew 8:20). The King of kings, He becomes a slave. The Creator, He is spit on by His creatures. The source of truth, He is found guilty of a lie. The source of light, for three hours He hangs in the darkness. The source of life, He is crucified, died, and was buried. Jesus went from the pinnacle of praise in the universe to the ultimate, absolute nothing. “He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him; nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him” (Isaiah 53:2b).

Because of the Servant’s selfless sacrifice, Isaiah 54 announces that Zion’s precious children and priceless city structures will be renewed. Her tents, once destroyed, are not only restored but also expanded. Her dead children are forgotten, and a new family is begun in a city now safe and prosperous. God’s reversal of Zion’s shame is complete. The barren one gives birth to many children. The ravages of the Babylonian flood have receded and given way to peace. The refugees in Babylon now have a

rebuilt city decked in royal splendor! “For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you.”

This restoration prefigures God’s greatest act of salvation, Christ’s resurrection from the dead. Because Jesus is alive, in Word and Sacrament, the Holy Spirit delivers the blessings of rich, cleansing forgiveness that comes from the Servant’s five wounds. John is beside himself: “From His fullness we have received grace upon grace” (John 1:16). Paul is amazed: “And you have been given fullness in Christ” (Colossians 2:10). David shouts, “You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5). And Jesus confirms it: “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

There is enough fullness to pay off the debt. It is the day’s wages paid to workers who had worked only an hour, the father scrubbing the stench of pig off his son’s back, and a criminal in the kingdom. “My power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). Jesus says these words, Paul writes them down, and Zion lives them out!

So our posture at all times and in all places is to beg, not brag; to beseech, not boast; to bend our knees, not strut our stuff. We are called to relearn the apostolic attitude expressed, “We have this treasure in jars of

clay to show that the transcendent power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

“For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you.” After death there is resurrection! And this means God, plus absolutely nothing, equals absolutely everything! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.