

Festal Matins, Easter Day

Exodus 14. 10-18, 26 – 15. 2 and Revelation 15. 2-4

Mother Emma

“Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!” So we sang in our first hymn, joining together in the shout of praise and thanksgiving with Christians all across the world and throughout the centuries, rejoicing together that Christ has burst from the tomb, overcoming the power of death and bringing hope and new life to us all.

This week we have walked together through the solemnity and darkness of Holy Week, remembering Judas’ betrayal, Christ’s trial and condemnation, and his terrible death. Last night we lit the New Fire in the churchyard, walking back into the darkness of the church by the light of the Paschal candle, but seeing that darkness gradually broken up by the lights of many candles, and – dramatically – by the turning on of our new external backlighting for the East Window.

The joy of Easter and of the Resurrection had begun.

Those who come to this service of Choral Matins on Easter Day may be puzzled or even disappointed that the readings appointed for this service do not include the wonderful story of Jesus meeting the weeping Mary Magdalene in the Garden of the Resurrection, which we heard at the Eucharist this morning. Yet the readings traditionally chosen for this service reveal to us many of the deeper levels of imagery of the Easter story, together with ancient songs of praise, which blend with our own joyful hymns this morning.

Of course, we will be aware that the Crucifixion of Christ took place around the Jewish festival of the Passover, the commemoration of the Israelites escaping from slavery under the Egyptians as God parted the Red Sea for them to pass through, the story which was the subject of our Old Testament reading. The close links between Passover and Easter remind us of God’s salvation plan throughout history – again and again he has lovingly intervened to save his people – from the Exodus from Egypt to Christ’s self-sacrifice for us on the Cross.

Last night we baptised two adults, and at this morning’s service, two young children into the Christian faith, following in the tradition of the Early Church to baptize on Easter morning, so that the newly-baptised may rise with Christ to a new life. In the prayer over the baptismal water, we also heard the story of the escape through the Red Sea, remembering that God allowed his people to pass through water to freedom and safety, in a beautiful link with the sacrament of baptism as WE pass through water to join the company of Christ’s pilgrim people.

The imagery of Easter is based around the dramatic movement from darkness to light, from death to life, from grief to joy and from despair to hope. We see all of these elements reflected in the story of the parting of the Red Sea, and in God’s care for his people.

Of course, as a modern liberal, I have always flinched a little at the Israelites' song of joy at the drowning of the Egyptian soldiers who had pursued them, but I am very well aware of the power and magnitude of this story for all those who over the ages have been enslaved or oppressed.

We can relate to their joy and relief, bursting out of them at their miraculous escape, as they sing:

"The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation." Yet the enemy overcome this morning by Christ's Resurrection, is of cosmic proportions.

In our second reading, we are reminded that the victory we celebrate today is over evil itself, and the power of death. In the Revelation to St John, our second reading, we hear of the Lamb, the sacrificed Christ, and his followers, who have overcome death and been gathered into the beauty of Heaven. We may recognise in this passage many of the traditional images of heaven, as the saints gather around a glassy sea, playing their harps and singing their own song of victory and joy before God: *Great and marvellous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints... Thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before thee.* It is a poignant moment when we think of people bursting into song at the recognition of God's glory, from ancient times and onwards into our hope of heaven.

Easter in many ways marks a new beginning, a new life, as Christ rises from the dead, the baptised rise to their new lives in him, and we rejoice and renew our own faith and hope in the recollection of his saving work for us. Christ has overcome death, and opened the gate of Heaven – as he promised his uncomprehending disciples before his death: *I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.*

Easter, sadly, does not mean there is no evil left in the world. It is the beginning of the new Creation, the *"now, and the not yet"*. This year, once again, we grieve over the violence and conflict in the world; the many who are displaced by devastation or economic hardship; the greed and selfishness which continue to make their mark. Yet we are also challenged once again, as we celebrate together today, to follow in Christ's footsteps, to demonstrate his love of others and his self-sacrifice, and to live as Easter people, filled with hope and compassion for others.

With the Israelites and the saints in St John's vision of Heaven, we lift our voices in praise and thanksgiving for God's love and salvation. Amen