

# Easter Vigil

(Year A)

<i>Reading 1</i>	Genesis 1:1-2:2
<i>Response</i>	Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 104:1-2, 5-6, 10, 12, 13-14, 24, 35
<i>Response</i>	You are my inheritance, O Lord.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 16:5, 8, 9-10, 11
<i>Reading 3</i>	Exodus 14:15-15:1
<i>Response</i>	Let us sing to the Lord; he has covered himself in glory.
<i>Psalm</i>	Exodus 15:1-2, 3-4, 5-6, 17-18
<i>Reading 4</i>	Isaiah 54:5-14
<i>Response</i>	I will praise you, Lord, for you have rescued me.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 30:2, 4, 5-6, 11-12, 13
<i>Reading 5</i>	Isaiah 55:1-11
<i>Response</i>	You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.
<i>Psalm</i>	Isaiah 12:2-3, 4, 5-6
<i>Reading 6</i>	Baruch 3:9-15, 32C4:4
<i>Response</i>	Lord, you have the words of everlasting life.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 11
<i>Reading 7</i>	Ezra 36:16-17A, 18-28
<i>Response (w/ Baptism)</i>	Like a deer that longs for running streams, my soul longs for you, my God.
<i>Psalm (w/ Baptism)</i>	Psalm 42:3, 5; 43:3, 4
<i>Response (w/o Baptism)</i>	You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation.
<i>Psalm (w/o Baptism)</i>	Isaiah 12:2-3, 4BCD, 5-6
<i>Epistle</i>	Romans 6:3-11
<i>Response</i>	Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 118:1-2, 16-17, 22-23
<i>Gospel</i>	Matthew 28:1-10

Now at last, after 40 days in the desert with Jesus, after six weeks of the Lenten season, at the climax of the holy three days of the Sacred Triduum, we come to the apex, we come to the climax of the great feast of all feasts, the Easter vigil. Obviously at this feast we are going to be celebrating, first and foremost, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. As the Church says, this is the most important feast of the entire liturgical year. And yet one of the first things that will strike you if you go to the Easter vigil, is just how many readings there are at the Easter vigil. So if you've ever attended a vigil mass, you'll know that when you sit down for Easter vigil, there are not one, not two, not three, not four, but seven Old Testament readings and seven Responsorial Psalms with each of those readings, in addition to the second reading from the letter of St. Paul and then the Gospel.

So obviously there is no way possible for us in the space of a short video to do all seven of the Old Testament readings as well as the New Testament epistle and the Gospel. What I would like to do instead is follow my normal method of starting with the Gospel, and then going back and looking at at least one key connection between one of those seven readings and the Gospel for this Sunday in Year A for the Easter vigil. I said Sunday, but Sunday begins the evening before in the liturgical tradition, not in the morning — this is following the Jewish tradition of starting liturgical days at sunset of the previous day. So we really are celebrating the Sunday of Easter, even though we are doing it on the vigil. So what I am going to do today is I am going to look at the Gospel reading — start with the Gospel reading for Year A, Easter Vigil from Matthew — and then I am going to go back to the Old Testament reading and see how this all connects together. So let's begin. Matthew 28:1-10. On the Easter vigil in Year A, the Church uses the same readings every year for the Old Testament and the epistle and the Psalm, but it alternates the accounts of the resurrection between each of the three synoptic Gospels. This year it's from Matthew 28, which reads as follows:

Now after the sabbath, toward the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Mag'dalene and the other Mary went to see the sepulchre. And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone, and sat upon it. His appearance was like lightning, and his raiment white as snow. And for fear of him the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not

here; for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him. Lo, I have told you." So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Hail!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brethren to go to Galilee, and there they will see me."<sup>1</sup>

Alright, so this is Matthew's account of the empty tomb and the resurrection. There are lots of things we could say about this Gospel. For example, we could point out the fact that the first motive of credibility for believing in the resurrection is the discovery of the empty tomb. This shows that early Christians believe not just that Jesus' soul was alive with God, but that something had happened to his body. We could also point out that this was clearly a supernatural occurrence, because there is a great earthquake and these angels appear from heaven and the guards tremble and become like dead men. In other words, they are overcome at this supernatural manifestation of the power of the angels. We could also maybe discuss the fact that when the angel gives the message to the women, that it is the women who bring the first news of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus' resurrection, to the disciples. It's interesting that it's the women first that receive that message and bring it to the Apostles. All those are interesting points, but today what I want to focus on most is just one little detail from the resurrection account of Matthew, and it is that first line:

After the Sabbath toward the dawn of the first day of the week.

So why is that important? Well because Matthew — remember — is in some ways the most Jewish of all four Gospels, certainly the most Jewish of the three synoptic Gospels. And when he gives you this cue as to when the resurrection took place, he isn't just recording the fact that "hey, it was Sunday morning when Jesus was raised from the dead," he's deliberately highlighting the connection between the resurrection of Jesus from the dead on Easter Sunday and the fact that it takes place

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

after the Sabbath on the first day of the week. Why does that matter? Well for us it matters because if you take that little bit of information and go back to the Old Testament reading for the Easter vigil in Year A, you are going to see something significant. You're going to notice that every single year on the Easter vigil, the first reading we read from the Old Testament is the momentous, amazing, really profound account of the creation of the universe. It is Genesis 1. We always read the first chapter of the first book of the Bible at every Easter vigil. And so in this case the question is why? Why do we start there? Why start with the six days of creation in Genesis 1? What I want to suggest to you in this video is that it is very deliberate on the Church's part. There is a connection between the resurrection of Jesus on Sunday and then the account of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis 1. So in order to see that connection, we are going to look for just a moment — we are not going to read the whole account of the six days, although if you've ever heard it read well at an Easter vigil at night (especially if it is still kind of dark in the sanctuary) it is profound. The words of this chapter are moving when they're done well. We are just going to look at a couple of elements for our purposes here. I want to read the beginning and the end of the account of the six days. So let's start here. The first reading for today says this — this is Genesis 1:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, one day [some translations have the first day].

Then of course, as you know, it goes on to narrate over and over again that same refrain, "there was evening, there was morning, a second day; there was evening, there was morning, a third day; there was evening, there was morning, a fourth day;" all the way down to the sixth day on which God says in verse 26:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that

creeps upon the earth.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

So it climaxes with the creation of man and woman on the sixth day of creation, and then the account comes to an end in chapter 2, verse one, which says this:

Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done.

That's the first reading for Easter vigil. Why do we start there, and what connection does it have with the resurrection of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew for this week? It's very simple actually, but it is very profound at the same time. Two points. First, notice that the six days of creation in Genesis 1 are the biblical foundation for the Jewish practice of keeping the Sabbath. Sometimes Christians mistakenly think that the Sabbath is Sunday, because they call it Sabbath rest and talk about Sunday as the Sabbath. But the Sabbath is not Sunday, the Sabbath is the seventh day of the week. The Sabbath is what we call Saturday. So what the Jews are describing here — what any ancient Jew would've understood as being described here — is God's account of the creation of the world and God resting on Saturday, resting on the Sabbath, resting on the seventh day of the week.

Now the reason that matters though, from an ancient Jewish perspective, is because if God rests from creation on the seventh day of the week and then you back it up to the beginning, what does that imply? Well then what day of the week does God create the world on? What is the first day? The first day is Sunday. So they would've seen Sunday as the day on which the world was made, as the day of creation. So when Matthew is giving you his account of the resurrection of Jesus, and he says “after the Sabbath on the first day of the week,” that's not just an account of what day Jesus was raised, it is also an allusion to the six days of Genesis in Genesis 1. The Church then at the Easter vigil is connecting the six days of creation in Genesis 1 with the day of Jesus's resurrection. And what does this reveal to us? This reveals to us — and what Matthew is definitely showing to his audience — that Jesus is raised from the dead. Jesus ushers in the beginning of the new creation on the same day God makes the old creation. In other words, Sunday is fitting as a day of resurrection because God is, in essence, through the death and resurrection of Christ, making all things new. He's making a new

universe. He's making a new world, and He's beginning it with the very body of Jesus of Nazareth, with the very body of his crucified and risen son. So that is the first point. When the Church begins with the six days of creation, She's anticipating the new creation now taking place in Christ.

But there's more going on here for the Easter vigil, because if you look at those opening verses of Genesis, you are going to see something else that is interesting. In the Easter vigil, what is taking place? Well, catechumens are receiving the sacrament of Baptism and all Christians gathered at the Mass are renewing the vows of their Baptism. And what is so interesting about that is in those very first verses, what is being described here, it says that when God created the heavens and the earth, “the earth was formless and void, and darkness was on the face of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.” So the second aspect of Genesis 1 that is important for this day is the fact that on the first day of creation, what stands out is the presence of the Spirit and the presence of water. Now I know some translations will say “the breath of God” or “the wind of God was moving about over the face of the waters.” The reason they say that is because the Hebrew word here for spirit, *ruach*, actually means breath, wind and spirit. It means all three of those. So God, in that sense, in Genesis 1 makes the world through the power of water and the Spirit on the first day. Well then now in the resurrection — as Paul will say in his writings — Christ is raised through the power of the spirit. He's drawn out of the waters of the Baptism of his crucifixion — he describes his crucifixion as a Baptism, as immersion and death — and he begins a new creation. And that's the same thing that is happening with the Sacrament of Baptism.

So what happens when a person receives the Sacrament of Baptism through the power of water and the spirit is that God is making you, making that individual, making that person into a new creation. And the same thing is true, another aspect of it, if you look at Genesis 1:3, is on that first day, on that Sunday, on that day the world is made in Genesis 1, it also says “God said, ‘let there be light.’” Now why does that matter? Well if you recall from a few weeks back, we were looking at the story of the man born blind. When Jesus heals the man born blind, we saw that the Fathers interpreted that as a prefiguration of the Sacrament of Baptism, where Jesus gives sight to the baptized. Not physical sight, but spiritual sight so that they can see that he is the light of the world. Well when did the light of the world come

in to the world? It came into the world on the first day in Genesis 1. So when God says “let there be light,” that's a prefiguration of the true light that is coming into the world to enlighten everyone. And that light is Christ. So once again, when a person is baptized at the Easter vigil, they are receiving the light of Christ.

Now I know these verses are so rich I could spend forever just talking about them, but notice one other aspect of that first section of Genesis 1. You might not have caught it, but it said something interesting. It said “let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Now why does God speak in the plural in those verses? Usually in the Old Testament God speaks in the singular. It is only on a couple occasions where he speaks in the plural. So for centuries ancient Jewish writers and ancient Christian writers have puzzled, “who is the us?” “Let us make man in our image.” There are different theories out there. Some people say “it's the Royal we,” like when a king or queen says “let us do this” or “we shall do this” with only one person. The problem with that theory is that God doesn't frequently talk that way. God is always a king but he doesn't usually use the plural. Another theory is that he is talking to the angelic court. He's talking to the Angels, “let us make man in our image.” The problem with that is that the Bible never says anywhere else that angels create, that angels make human beings. The angels are missionaries or servants, they are messengers, but they're not creators. So it is kind of an enigma until the New Testament comes along. And the ancient Christian writers all interpreted this reference to us as a kind of clue, or a sign, of the mystery of the Trinity. So that when God makes man and woman in his image and likeness, the “us” that is speaking here is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Now you might think that that is stretching it, “you're reading it into the text.” But what is so fascinating about this is the reason the Father's saw this in the passage is because if look at that account of the first day, look at what it says, “in the beginning” 1. “God created”, 2. “the spirit hovered on the face of the waters” and 3. How does God make the light? “God said, Let there be light.” So you have God, you have the spirit and you have the word all right there. St. Augustine saw this very clearly in his commentary on Genesis. So what the Father's saw here is not just the mystery of creation, not just mystery of the light of Christ, not just the mystery of Baptism, but the mystery of the Trinity itself. In a sense, the very first verses of the Scripture, in a hidden way, through divine inspiration, begin to reveal to us the mystery of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. So once you

have that in mind, once again, what does that say about the significance of Baptism? In Baptism, a person isn't just becoming a new creation, they're entering into the life of the Trinity. Because how are they baptized? In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. So they are entering into the mystery of the new creation and into the mystery of the Trinity at the same time. Obviously there is so much more that we could say here, but I just want to stress this because this opening reading from the book of Genesis 1 is profound, it's moving. And it should be profound and moving to us because it's revealing in a hidden way, but in a real way, that all the mysteries of faith are summed up in it and foreshadowed in it and anticipated by it so that when you connect the Old Testament with the New Testament it comes alive. You begin to see the resurrection of Jesus in a whole new way.

Lots of times Christians look at the Resurrection, they look at the empty tomb of Jesus almost as just a kind of vindication of the fact that Jesus was right, or that Jesus was who he said he was. In other words, "they said he wasn't the Messiah, but he came back from the dead and he proved it that he really was. He showed it to them. You can't keep a good man down." You get the idea, but the resurrection is a lot more than that. Yes it's a proof of his divinity. Yes it's a proof of his Messiahship. But even more, it's the inauguration of the new creation. Because up until the resurrection, creation is fallen. It's in the darkness of sin. It's full of suffering and under the power of death, and Jesus comes to break the power of death and make a whole new universe, to make a new world, and he's the beginning of that new world. His body is the beginning of the new creation. And so it is fitting that the resurrection on the first day of the week takes place on the same day of the week that Genesis 1 describes creation: the first day of the week on Sunday.

With that in mind, there are lots of other readings in the Old Testament. There are six other readings after the first account of creation: Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac, the crossing of the Red Sea with Moses, the wedding of God and his bride from Isaiah, the feast of water and wine from Isaiah, the coming of Wisdom from Baruch, and then the seventh reading is the sprinkling of clean water from the book of Ezekiel. I don't have time to go through each one of those, but what I could tell you is as you read them, each one of them works the same way Genesis 1 works. It is typological. In other words, it prefigures a New Testament reality that Christ



is going to fulfill himself. So the sacrifice of Isaac prefigures the death of Christ, the beloved son on Calvary. The crossing of the Red Sea prefigures our deliverance from Satan and sin in the waters of Baptism. The wedding of God and his bride from Isaiah prefigures the coming of Christ, the divine bridegroom. The feast of water and wine from Isaiah prefigures the Eucharist that the candidates at the Easter vigil are about to receive for the first time — as well as the catechumens. The promise of wisdom appearing on earth in Baruch prefigures the coming of God in his word in sacred Scripture that we hear proclaimed. And then the sprinkling of clean water from Ezekiel prefigures the gift of Baptism and the gift of the Holy Spirit. So each one of those seven readings is typological, and they all are pointing forward to the new covenant and to the gifts and the sacraments and the mysteries of the new covenant.

And you can see this clearly if you look at the second reading here, how there is this bridge from the old to the new covenant. The second reading is from Romans 6:3-11 and it's all about Baptism. So that is why I keep focusing on Baptism. You might think, “why are you focusing so much on Baptism Dr. Pitre, when this about the resurrection?” Well, because those are two ways of talking about the same mystery in many ways. Listen to what St. Paul says about Baptism:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For he who has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

So what is Paul describing here? Baptism is, in short, our participation in not just the death of Jesus Christ, but also his resurrection. Baptism is not just our participation in his burial, into the waters of death, but also our participation in his resurrection from the waters of death through the power of the Holy Spirit. This is one of the reasons, by the way, that baptism by immersion is such a powerful symbol of death and resurrection. Because if you take a child and you immerse that child, for example, or an adult, in the waters of Baptism, when you go underwater and you come up from the water, what you do? You take a deep breath. It's like the intake of the Holy Spirit and the beginning of new life in Christ. It is the beginning of a new creation. And that's really the theme that the Church is calling us to focus on at the Easter vigil. It is the theme of a new creation and resurrection from the dead.

And I'll end with this quotation from the Catechism of the Catholic Church on this matter, because I think this is something really important for us to stress. As we are coming to the Easter vigil, and we are coming to the most important Sunday of the entire year, the Sunday of Easter, it is critical to remember why Sunday matters to us as Christians. And Sunday matters for this reason, Sunday is not just the day of the resurrection of Jesus, but it is the day of the beginning of the new creation. And when we die with Christ in Baptism and rise with him through Baptism, we no longer belong to the old creation, in which the worship was centered on Saturday, on Sabbath, we now belong to the new creation, in which worship is centered on Sunday. This is very important for Catholics to understand. Why do we worship on Sunday and not Saturday when the the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament say "keep the Sabbath day holy." That means keep Saturday holy. Why don't we follow that commandment? Which other commandments do we break? Sometimes Seventh-day Adventists will ask that of Catholics. They think we are breaking the Decalogue. We are not breaking the Decalogue. The Sabbath itself was a shadow and it was part of the old creation. But when we die with Christ in Baptism, we become part of the new creation. The Catechism of the Catholic Church actually says this in paragraph 2174. Listen to these words, I'll end with this:

Jesus rose from the dead "on the first day of the week."

That's quoting Matthew 28:1, the verse we began our discussion with.

Because it is the "first day," the day of Christ's Resurrection recalls the first creation. Because it is the "eighth day" following the sabbath, it symbolizes the new creation ushered in by Christ's Resurrection. For Christians it has become the first of all days, the first of all feasts, the Lord's Day (he kuriake hemera, dies dominica) Sunday:

And then the Catechism quotes St. Justin Martyr, who says:

We all gather on the day of the sun, for it is the first day [after the Jewish sabbath, but also the first day] when God, separating matter from darkness, made the world; and on this same day Jesus Christ our Savior rose from the dead.

That's really what Easter is all about. It's that God didn't come into the world just to save us from hell or to save us from our sins, he came into the world to make all things new, to usher in a new creation. That is good news, the good news of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Happy Easter everybody!