

RAISE THE STRAIN OF TRIUMPHANT GLADNESS  
Ex. 14:10-15:1; Vigil of Easter; April 3, 2021

**P** Alleluia! Christ is risen!

**C** He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

The Vigil of Easter Service traditionally was held in the darkness of Easter Eve and would conclude at about the same time the sun rose on Easter morning. At the Easter Vigil the Acclamation was heard for the first time, that Christ is risen from the dead and has defeated all His enemies. Traditionally, the “Alleluia” cry would go up as the first rays of sun would break the eastern horizon. It is a joyful cry as the ancient hymn puts it: “raise the strain of triumphant gladness.”

Vigils are held in other circumstances. When a sick loved one’s life is in the balance, we might hold vigil through the night, watching and praying for a good outcome. When we are waiting for someone to arrive back at home after a long absence, we might stay up and pray for a safe journey and joyful homecoming. Or in times of war, when we know that a decisive battle is being waged, we might hold vigil praying for a victory over our enemies.

The Vigil of Easter is like those other vigils in that we watch and pray, but is completely different in that we already know the outcome. Jesus Christ took on all our enemies and defeated them completely. Sin: defeated. Death: defeated. The devil: defeated. There is no need to stay up to fret and worry tonight about the outcome, which has been decided already. Christ is risen from the dead and there is nothing that is ever going to change that.

This Service is designed to make this point from the very beginning. After invoking the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are told why we are here to hold this Vigil. “On this most holy night, in which our Lord Jesus passed over from death to life, we are gathered here in vigil and in prayer. This is the Passover of the Lord in which, by hearing His Word and celebrating His Sacraments, we share in His victory over death” (*LSB Altar Book*, 531). Tonight is about the victory that Jesus Christ won for us, the victory over death He shares with His Church through His Holy Word and Sacraments.

Christ's victory over His enemies is in line with Old Testament accounts of God at work we heard tonight. The Scripture I am focusing on is the Exodus 14 and 15 Reading, of "Israel's Deliverance at the Red Sea." The account begins with the Israelites trapped, with the Red Sea on one side and the Egyptian army about to attack by land on the other. The Israelites were looking total defeat in the face. Their deaths were certain. None of them would be spared after the plague of the first-born sons of the Egyptians was revenged upon them. The Israelites cried out to the Lord in fear, doubting that He had any good thing in store for them. Night was falling and they knew that the attack, their defeat and deaths would come with the morning.

What did God's prophet Moses say in response to that? **"Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."**

The reason why Moses could be so certain that they were not doomed to death was that the Lord would do all the fighting for them. "Be quiet! Stop your whining and complaining about God! It might look hopeless right now – and it would be if the outcome depended on us – but God is about to engage in battle with your enemies and win the victory for you." God divided the Red Sea in two and led the Israelites through on dry ground, and when the Egyptians followed them, God caused them to get stuck. And then in terror the Egyptians saw their deaths coming, that they were doomed to be drowned and die in the sea, which God worked. Moses reports the victory this way: **Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.**

Our victory in Christ is accomplished by God along the same lines. God fought for us in Christ. Jesus' death on the cross accomplished that victory, and He rose from the dead to share that victory with us. Sin cannot condemn us; we are forgiven. The devil cannot claim us; we have been set free by the purchase price of Jesus' blood. Even death, the last enemy, will not hold us because we have already risen with Christ in Holy Baptism.

So we have held the Vigil this evening, not in fear and trembling wondering what the outcome will be, but with faithful joy and confidence knowing the victorious outcome of God's battle with sin, death, and the devil. We do not enter the darkness of this night in the gloom of despair, but in the light of Christ that scatters the darkness and brings life and immortality to light. The darkness of death has been banished forever, and the Church of Christ is clothed in the brightness of His light (Exsultet).

*Alleluia! Now we cry  
 To our King immortal,  
 Who, triumphant, burst the bars  
 Of the tomb's dark portal.  
 Come, you faithful, raise the strain  
 Of triumphant gladness!  
 God has brought His Israel  
 Into joy from sadness! (LSB 487.5)*

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