

# **Savoring the Resurrection**

**Paul Turner**

**A good party may go on for hours. Music, laughter, conversation, food, drinks, and friends mix into a happy blend. When the mood is right, people want the party to go on and on. And it may - well past midnight.**

**Then they go home. People party for hours at a time, not for days at a time. And nobody parties for weeks at a time.**

**Except Christians.**

**Welcome to Easter. It's our 50-day celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It includes the end of lenten fasting, the sunny smiles of the newly baptized, the most joyous music of the year, bright clothes, and time with the people who mean the most to us. Easter is one long season of joy.**

**It's not easy to keep it up. It is hard to stay in the experience of the resurrection. We humans aren't programmed to be that happy that long. Even the lilies that occupy the sanctuary give up before the season is halfway over. Yet there we are partying on, decorations on the wall, hymns at fortissimo, and vestments of brilliant white.**

**The memories of the Easter Vigil and Easter Day fade in the background as the season melts before other priorities that can populate the spring: confirmation, first communion, Mothers' Day, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, visiting relatives, picnics, even parish financial appeals. You think December is busy? Wait until May.**

**What's a Christian to do? We have ways of preparing for Christmas and celebrating it. We have plenty of ideas for making a good Lent. But Easter as an entire season? Who makes a good Easter? And how do you know you've done it?**

**Perhaps the first tip for a successful Easter is having a successful Lent. If you have spent 40 days of fast, you'll appreciate 50 days of feast. You will recognize the power of the risen Christ helping you overcome sin and temptation. If you have made the season of Lent a time for personal spiritual evaluation, then the rejoicing of Easter will have some real meaning to it. But if your Lent was flabby - well, what do you expect?**

**A second tip is to have a successful Easter Vigil. This, of course, means that you are actually there at the Easter Vigil. Many Catholics opt out. They've heard all about it. It's long. Lots of readings. They don't know any of the catechumens. Why be there? Besides, the real Easter is Easter Sunday.**

**It's hard to know where to begin to correct that kind of thinking. The Easter Vigil is arguably the most important mass of the entire year. Only at the Vigil do you gather in the night around the fire that shatters darkness. Only at the Vigil do you hear the readings that reveal salvation history, along with the return of the Gloria and the alleluia after six weeks; and you will hear the first announcement of the gospel of the resurrection. Only at the Vigil do you celebrate with the newly baptized who have waited, prepared and longed for this day. Only at the Vigil do**

**you share the first communion of the Easter season, the sacramental presence of the risen Christ among us.**

**Upon the memory of a good Easter Vigil you can ride the joy of the Easter season. The readings and symbols of the 50 days will radiate out from the breaking dawn of the feast of resurrection.**

**One of the pivotal moments in the Easter Vigil is the renewal of baptismal promises. We take this for granted now, but it is a fairly recent addition to the celebration. It is meant to give all the faithful the opportunity to end their lenten discipline and step into the spirituality of Easter. Remember the catechumens: They renounce any allegiance that keeps them from Christ, and they profess their faith in the God who saves. In a similar way, the faithful renounce the sin they beat back with lenten practices and profess their faith anew.**

**One way to bridge Lent and Easter is to make the renewal of those promises. Make them consciously, thinking specifically about what sin you have sought to overcome, and the hope to which you cling. As you renew your promises, summon up the memory of a rigorous Lent, and enter the joy of Easter.**

**On the Second Sunday of Lent, you can build on this faith by hearing the gospel account of the doubting Thomas. This passage is proclaimed every year on this day because the two halves of the story take place on the day of the resurrection and a week later. We who have already celebrated Easter Day return a week later to meet Christ again in the Eucharist. There we hear a very reasonable Thomas wanting more proof than the words of his colleagues, who, like any friends, had probably tested his gullibility from time to time. A week later, when Jesus appears and invites Thomas to step forward, limbs and digits extended, Thomas makes one of the greatest statements of belief in the history of Christianity: "My Lord and my God." That phrase has become a traditional acclamation recited by many of the faithful during the consecration of the bread and wine at mass. In Ireland, it's one of the options for the memorial acclamation. As Thomas recognized the risen Christ on the Sunday after Easter, so we recognize him in the sacrament of the eucharist.**

**Accounts of Jesus appearing at a meal are retold in the gospels of the Third Sunday of Easter each year. At the Easter Vigil, the first communions of the newly baptized brings their joy to a climax. Many Christians have lost that first fervor for the eucharist. If you haven't met the newly baptized, ask them what it's like to receive communion now. That should give your faith a boost. When we witness the happiness of those sharing the sacred banquet for the first time and hear the accounts of the risen Jesus at meals, our own faith can be renewed.**

**Our faith can also be summoned into action. On the final Sundays of the Easter season, the gospels are all excerpted from the discourse and prayer Jesus offered at the Last Supper. In the solemn liturgies of the Easter season, we look back to the events on the night before Jesus died. At that table he shared his farewell thoughts about the unity and mission of the community he would leave behind. His words take up several chapters of John's gospel, so we hear them in**

smaller sections week by week and year by year. They remind us that the eucharist is not just a banquet we receive. It is the fuel for our service.

Throughout the Easter season the paschal candle burns at every liturgical celebration. It proclaims the resurrection of Christ among us. When the priest prepared the candle at the Vigil, he carved this year's date into it, along with a cross, and the Greek letters alpha and omega. The candle is supposed to be new every year. We're not supposed to go out and buy a plastic number to paste over the final digit on last year's candle. We get a whole new candle. Christ is risen anew in our hearts. By carving the year into the wax, the priest is proclaiming that Christ is risen right now for this community, this year. The alpha and omega demonstrate that this is not a temporary visit, like the arrival of relatives in search of a meal and a bed. Citing the first chapter of the Book of Revelation, the priest proclaims that Christ is the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, the one whose presence spans time and eternity.

The candle reappears throughout the year at every celebration of baptism and every funeral. Baptism sets us on the threshold of eternal life, and our death opens its door. Seeing the candle for 50 days spanning 7 Sundays, we are reminded again and again of its imperious message: Christ rules as king of kings because of his resurrection. The cross, the instrument of his passion, inscribed in the wax, has been transformed into a sign of resurrection. Even as the wax melts, diminishing the height of the candle, its message never fades: No matter our own diminishment - in health, companionship, or insight - the resurrection shines bright now in our hearts as a beacon for future glory. Seeing the candle week after week can embolden this faith.

Alleluias return. Just as the paschal candle provides a visual cue to the meaning of Easter, the alleluia presents an aural one. This Hebrew word translates almost blandly into English as "Praise God." But its sound is delightful to sing and hear. It expresses joy better than any other word we know. If we ever need a quick reentry into the meaning of this season, the alleluia should help. It is a word that goes beyond words. It gives outside expression to our inside spirit. It connects us more directly with faith and hope. It is fun to sing. It gladdens the heart.

Even the various celebrations that seem to get in the way of Easter may in fact help us express its purpose. All the different occasions on which families gather and churches express their hopes fit within the overall plan of God for all creation. At the Easter Vigil, we heard the Exsultet announce the resurrection in the light of God's mighty deeds in the past. As we celebrate God's mighty deeds in the present, we give thanks that we are not abandoned. We continue to experience the power of the risen Christ in the love of couples who marry, in the success of students who graduate, in the care of children for their mothers, and in the faith of children approaching the table of the eucharist for the first time. God is at work in all these events. God has reached out first to us - first in the incarnation of Christ, and in his death and resurrection - but especially in the gift of the life we have received. God who made us will sustain us through these milestones that mark our way.

Those who would like to celebrate Easter in a special way could take on a much overlooked traditional exercise. They could participate in the eucharist during the Easter Octave. This custom was promoted early in church history. Those who were newly baptized returned to the church each day for a week to celebrate the eucharist and to receive mystagogical instruction from the bishop. He would lead them to a deeper appreciation of the mysteries they have celebrated, strengthening their faith.

Today, many of the prayers at mass during the Easter Octave still assume that the neophytes are there. In actuality, they rarely are. Everyone has things to do after Easter - including the priest. Most people want to kick back and relax, not enter into more prayer.

However, participating at the eucharist should enliven our days, not weary them. Those who come to daily mass during Lent have discovered that. If they make the time for the eucharist, it gives them a spiritual lift to carry them through their days of penance.

Very few people continue the practice for one more week. But it would be beautiful to do so. Now that Easter has come, what better way to celebrate Christ than to meet him day after day in the eucharist? Such a practice can lay a stronger foundation on which we can build for the 50 days to come.

And if, for any reason, your weekly participation at mass is not what it should be, then your Easter resolution is a no-brainer. Come to the eucharist! Share communion with the faithful! Hear the words of Christ in the gospel! Meet the body of Christ in your neighbor! Easter has plenty of joy to share. All we have to do is join the party.

**This article first appeared in *Liguorian* 101/4 (April 2013):11-14.**