

Easter Vigil Sermon
by Rabbi David Zaslow
delivered Saturday evening, March 22, 2008 at the Easter Vigil
Trinity Episcopal Church – Ashland, Oregon

First, I want to thank God, the members of this Church, and Rev. Anne for the honor of being invited to speak to you tonight. The night of the Easter Vigil was a time when my ancestors, not so long ago, hid in their homes for fear of the hatred that might be preached in local churches against the Jewish community. So, it is, indeed, a very special honor for me, and a healing for the souls of your ancestors and mine for me to be here tonight.

Two nights ago the Jewish people celebrated Purim where we honored the courage of a young queen named Esther who risked her life to save the lives of the Jewish people. Esther and Easter, do you hear the similarity? Yes, these two words actually share the same etymological root, originating with the Persian goddess of fertility named Ishtar. And guess what the ancients brought Ishtar as an offering? Yes, the egg, the Ishtar egg! The egg is prominent on the Passover Seder plate, a symbol of Easter, and originates as part of pre-monotheistic rituals to honor the fertility that comes with springtime.

Both of our faiths arose from polytheistic cultures. Judaism is a witness to God's unity – not so much to tell people "you are wrong to have so many gods," but to proclaim the new way of seeing reality – that all that are called "gods" are really threads of an extraordinary singularity, a single fabric that we call the Holy One. Christianity is our daughter faith whose mission is to carry the message of the Holy One's hope wherever it is needed in the world.

So, why do Jews honor Esther and Christians honor Easter at this time of year in particular? Because it seems that the physical rescue of Esther's people and the spiritual rescue of Christians through the resurrection are functionally identical. In a month from now Jews will celebrate Passover marking the end of enslavement. Liberation and resurrection, rescue and a chance for a new beginning – these are really springtime themes. The resurrection you celebrate today is rooted in the awakening of nature that we see all around us. Spring, in essence, is God rescuing and redeeming the cold, dark winter that is behind us now.

The Easter Vigil began in darkness tonight. Yet ironically, springtime celebrates the return of light. So, why begin in darkness? To remind us of where we have come from. From a long winter, from a challenging year, from wars, planetary depletion, and our individual lives unfulfilled. Your vigil tonight begins after sunset because only on the field of darkness can light have meaning and context.

But there would be no story if the liturgy tonight ended there. There would be no Easter, no resurrection if our faith were solely about the past. No, we are headed toward something even greater than an imperfect past. We are headed toward something even greater than yesterday's sins and mistakes.

There would be no Christianity with only the birth of Christ, your messiah. There would be no Christianity with only the magnificent teachings of Jesus, your teacher. No, Jesus' birth and the divine wisdom of the gospels need something else. The death of Christ? Yes, but death is not the end. It is the resurrection that makes your faith complete. From birth through life, through the gospels, an awful death and then – the resurrection.

In your holy tradition tonight is a period of time suspended between darkness and light, birth and resurrection, winter and spring, sin and forgiveness, between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. So let us begin and add another story to this great moment in your tradition – let us speak of the historical Jesus whose actual life has been severed from the theological Jesus beginning with the Church Fathers in the second century and sealed by Constantine in the year 325.

First, we need to realize that Jesus did not just die as a Jew. He died because he was a Jew. And he wasn't a Jew whose intent was to start a new religion. No, historically Jesus was one of hundreds of rabbis that were ordained in his generation in the land of Judea. He studied with many of them; he probably befriended most of them; he was beloved by some of them; and he was actually a student of the best of them. Together these cutting-edge Pharisees worked together to reform the corrupt Temple system that was being run by puppet priests appointed by the Roman Empire.

Tonight I honor Jesus' teacher who you probably never heard of, Rabbi Hillel, who taught Jesus the Golden Rule that Jesus recited in reverse (in good Talmudic fashion). Hillel taught "Don't do to others what you would not want others to do to you!" Tonight I honor Rabbi Akiva who was burned wrapped in a Torah scroll just a few decades after Jesus was crucified. It was Rabbi Akiva who said "Love your neighbor as yourself. This is the great commandment of Torah. Now go practice it!"

Master Jesus was actually Rabbi Joshua. Mary was Miriam. Luke was Levi. His brother James was Jacob, and Palestine was Judea. The disciples were *talmidim* or students and not known by the Greek term "disciples." Rabbi Joshua never heard of an "old" Testament. Jesus, his holy family, and his *talmidim* were all Jews who lived by all 613 commandments of the Torah, and many of them died for upholding Jewish law. In Jesus' lifetime alone more than 10,000 of his fellow Jews were crucified. Why?

Because they were preaching something new? No, because they were preaching something very old. Going back to Sinai. And back before that to Abraham: there is only one God, God is alive in history, God is available to each of us to forgive and absolve our sins, God is the God of new beginnings. So to this very day I, along with millions of other religious Jews bless G-d three times a day with these words: "Blessed are You, Adonai, Who brings the dead to life."

Indeed, it was the concept of the resurrection of the dead, a core innovation of the tradition of the rabbinic Judaism that was so threatening to the powers of Babylon 600 years before Jesus, threatening to the Greeks 300 years before Jesus, threatening to the Syrians 150 years before Jesus, and threatening to the Romans for another 100 years after the crucifixion of Jesus of up to 40,000 Jews, and the ethnic cleansing of almost the entire Jewish population from Judea beginning in the year 135.

Why was this mysterious theological concept such a threat to these great Empires? Did a power such as Rome really fear an insurrection from a tiny group of unarmed followers? I don't think so. It was not insurrection they feared but resurrection. The awakening of the dead from their graves – they feared the God of Israel who promised new life out of suffering, and rebirth out of death. Not just hundreds, but thousands, not just thousands, but tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of souls spiritually returning to earth. It was the mere idea of the resurrection that shook Rome to its core.

But this is just a part of the Jewish secret of the Easter Vigil. The Jews of the first century understood the resurrection differently than we do today. They did not just see it in the miraculous rebirth of Jesus on the third day, but they saw it in every flower, ever budding tree, ever blade of grass that was resurrected anew with the warm air of March and April. Spring itself was resurrection of the year that died behind us. Every morning itself was a glorious resurrection out of the death of winter

The resurrection might have been more of a threat to Rome, and to the corrupted Temple leaders, than armed resistance. The resurrection was the promise by God Almighty that no matter what Rome did spring was coming anyway. No matter how powerful Rome thought its judicial system was, God's forgiveness was coming anyway. No matter how brutal Rome would be the great salvation and liberation of the Lord was at hand.

Rome was powerless not because of a lack of armies. Rome was powerless because only the Holy One of Israel had the real power. Because the promise of Passover meant that there would not just be liberation on a physical level from the new Pharaohs of Rome, but that there would be freedom. Freedom for Judea. Freedom for all people. Freedom for each of us today. Freedom for Darfur and Tibet today.

So let us now look at some of the Biblical texts that you read tonight and look to discover the pattern that Rabbi Jesus would have recognized. The readings go like this – first you read from Genesis, the story of God creating both man and woman in a single design and in the image of the Divine. Then you read the story of the Exodus and how the Israelites were told to cross the sea. Then Isaiah reminds you of the hope that is promised for the future. But the liturgical reading does not end with hope. It ends on the prophetic fulfillment told by Zephaniah which is about today – the present tense recognition that out of death new life is here. Out of winter comes spring. Out of our personal enslavements comes liberation

The Jewish people's survival through thousands of years of anti-Semitism is a living testament to resurrection. The miraculous rebirth of the nation of Israel that happened in 1948 after almost 2,000 years is a living testament to the resurrection. Jesus was crucified and soon after the Temple in Jerusalem destroyed, and the Jews were forced by Rome to leave Judea, now renamed Palestine, in the year 135. Surviving the Crusades and eventually the Holocaust in the last century the Jewish people are a living testament to God's eternal promise – to my people through Torah and Israel, and to your people through Christ. The crucifixion is not seen as Jesus' failure, but a step toward the resurrection. The Holocaust was not the failure of Judaism but a step toward our redemption and return to our Holy Land.

The pattern in the texts that you read tonight seem clear from a Jewish perspective: Creation, Getting stuck as slaves in Egypt, a promise of hope, and then the redemption itself. Herein is the harmony of our two faiths. Ours celebrates physical liberation while yours celebrates the resurrection. Like an oboe and a violin – two unique instruments playing in a single Divine orchestra. It is spring outside. May we be worthy of hearing God's holy music in our lives.