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My cousin sent me a print of a photograph he found. It's a panoramic view of a Texas plain. The vast, cloudless sky; the flat ground; and, all around, cowboys, horses and cattle. The legend on the back reads: Last Roundup at the Spade Ranch — Fall 1924. My great-grandfather, David Nathan Arnett, managed the Spade Ranch for the Ellwood brothers of Chicago, the men who co-owned the patent on barbed wire. Except for the hired hands, all the men in the picture are Arnetts or Arnett kin: Tom and Dud and Homan and Carter and Bass and Albert and Stanford Arnett, and Jim Brown, Homan and Carter's uncle and the camp cook.

The men are listed, but so are the horses, each one named, and many described. Homan is holding Tony. Carter is holding Popcorn. The "white horse, saddled," is Traveler. The "horse with tail to Tom [is] either Baldy or Slut." And, as if to explain the confusion, the legend adds, "They [the horses] were half brothers." Family resemblance, you see, and so an easy mistake for the writer to make.

I try to imagine a life in which I live so close to horses that I know them all by name and sight and bloodline, even among the hundreds on a 280,000-acre ranch, a ranch 10 miles wide by 54 miles long. Of course, that is not my life, and not the life of almost anyone today. Texas, where the rural population was in the majority when I was growing up there, now has an urban majority.

So I can't understand the care with which the horses are included in the list of subjects, but I can understand, and do, how it is that we always name what we treasure, what we need, what matters. The care with which the men and horses in this picture were named makes me think of the care with which the Easter Vigil — what it is, who we are, why we gather, what we do — is named.

The Exsultet is the legend, the guide to the panoramic landscape of the Easter Vigil. Who is gathered to rejoice? Heavenly powers, choirs of angels, all creation. The earth and the Mother Church and all God's people join them.

How do we thank the Lord our God? We give thanks united. We give thanks with our hearts uplifted. We give thanks with full hearts and minds and voices.

Where have we gathered to rejoice and give thanks? We gather at our Passover feast, on the night God led Israel dry-shod through the sea. We gather on the night when the pillar of fire destroyed the darkness of sin, when Christians everywhere are washed clean of sin and are freed from all defilement. We gather on the night when Jesus Christ broke the chains of death and rose triumphant from the grave.

What happens on this night? Evil is dispelled, guilt is washed away, lost innocence is restored, mourners receive joy, hatred is cast out, peace comes to us and earthly pride is brought low. Heaven is wedded to earth, and we are reconciled with God.

My great-grandfather and his kin and hands gathered 90 years ago for a solemn ceremony on the high western plains. They assembled for a photograph, a rare and cumbersome event, but worth the time and trouble, for this was the marker of a land and a people and an identity. My great-grandfather would not have sat alone, and he and the cowboys would not have sat without the horses and cattle. Together, they made up the story of a life, of their lives, these men remembered by us only as "Fuzzy, a farmer from around Wolfforth" and "AG (I.Z.) Dillard."

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We Christians have gathered at the Easter Vigil year after year for over 2,000 years now. We do not gather alone, but in a cosmic community transcending and embracing the living and the dead, the present and the past, all tribes and races and languages. We know the candles we each hold to be a portion of the pillar of fire, "a flame divided but undimmed." We know that our little candles "mingle with the lights of heaven" and illuminate the night.

We name it all because it is our identity, our first breath and our last, our need, our hope, our treasure, our truth, our joy.

The world my great-grandfather oversaw is gone. Like the tornadoes that tear through the region north and west of Lubbock each spring and summer, time and new economies have swept his world away. But we continue to gather in honor and praise of the Morning Star which never sets.

May Christ, the Morning Star, who came back from the dead and shed his peaceful light on all humankind, who lives and reigns for ever and ever — may this Morning Star return and find our flames, divided but undimmed, still burning.

***Editor's note:*** This reflection was originally published in the April 2015 issue of [Celebration](#). Sign up to receive [daily Lenten reflections](#).

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