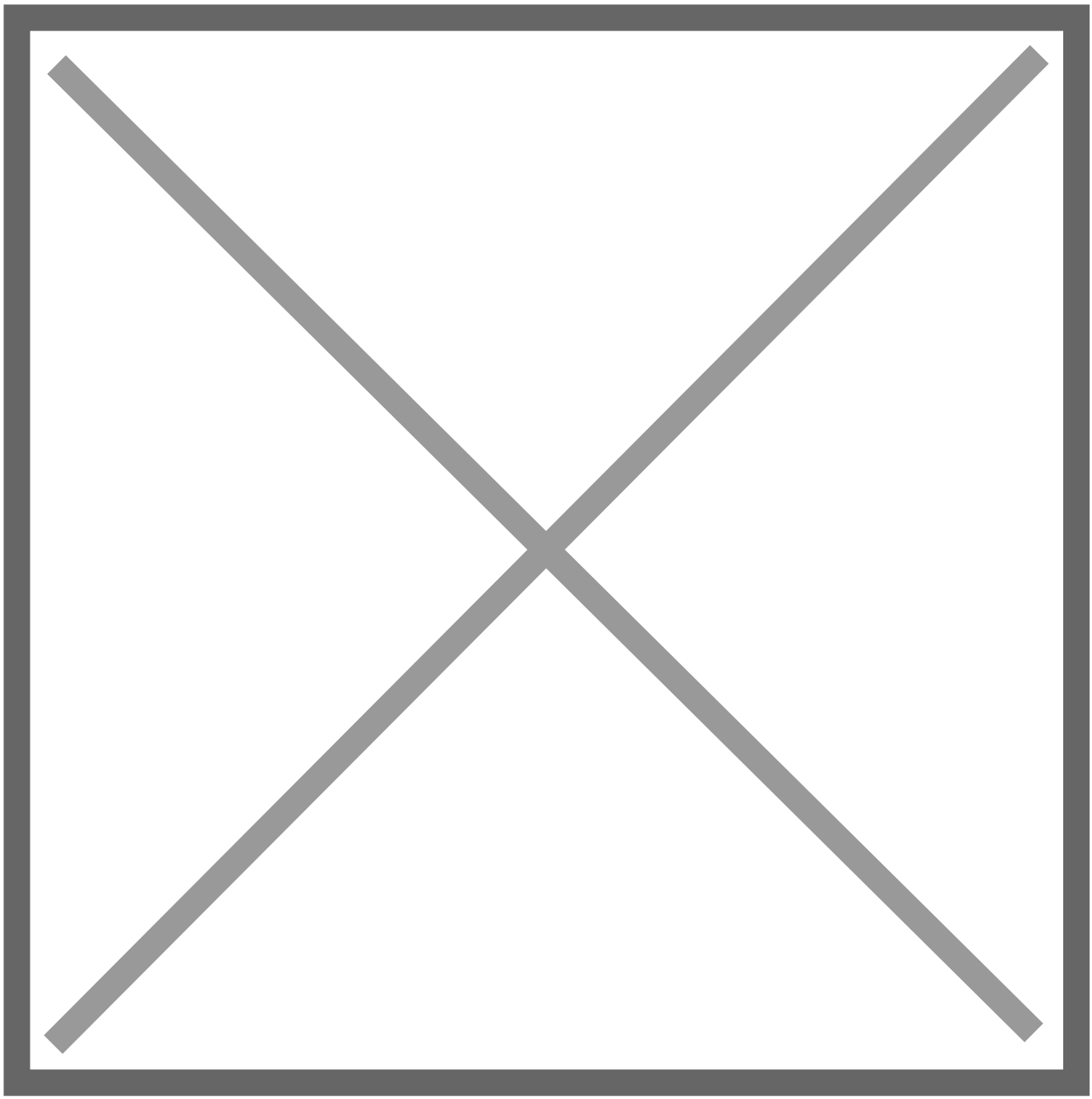
Spirituality



A worshipper lights a candle as she visits the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem's Old City May 26, 2020. (CNS/Debbie Hill)

by Dan Schutte

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**Editor's note**: NCR is sharing again with our readers this engaging triduum resource created in 2020 by board member and composer Dan Schutte. You can find the entire Easter triduum virtual liturgy celebration here.

This great vigil has its roots in the night of Passover when the Israelites stayed awake waiting for the Lord to deliver them. Like them, we gather as a family to tell the stories of our salvation and draw strength from the remembering. The most important thing is to allow the symbols of this night — the light, darkness, Paschal candle, the waters of baptism, the bread of life — to capture our imagination as we wait together in joyful hope for the good news of God's victory over death. In the process we discover for ourselves the glory of the cross.

**Prelude: Holy darkness**

Friday's liturgy ended in silence. Tonight's service begins in darkness. We often forget Holy Saturday, the Day of the Lord's Entombment, a day clothed in darkness and despair. Imagine the sadness and despair of the disciples on that day. Their dream had been shattered and they watched their friend, the one in whom they had put their hope, die a horrible death. So before we begin the Easter Vigil, let us allow ourselves to sit in the darkness and gather into our hearts all those places in our hearts that long for the Light of Christ.

**Easter proclamation: Most holy night**

As the Easter candle is carried in solemn into the darkened church, the cantor proclaims the words, "Christ, Our Light!" and the assembled community responds, "Thanks be to God!" As everyone's candles are lit, we hear the first proclamation of Easter in the Exsultet, a song of joy and exultation. The versions here, rather than being sung by a solo singer, is structured in three musical components: the

congregation's refrain, the male and female cantors' verses, and the choir's bridge between the two. The music is joyful but solemn compared to the exuberant joy of the "Glory to God" and "Gospel Alleluia." As we imagine the church filled with candlelight and faces waiting in quiet hope, we sing the triumph of God's mighty love.

**Scripture reading: Ezekiel**

The Easter Vigil liturgy, as it was originally imagined, is a night watch harkening back to the night the Israelites stayed awake in vigil waiting for the Lord to deliver them from their slavery in Egypt. Like they did, we tell the stories of our salvation beginning with the story of Creation and culminating for us in the story of Easter morning. For this virtual celebration of the Easter Vigil, the readings have been condensed into three: one from the prophet Ezekiel, one from Isaiah, and, finally, the Easter story from the Gospel of John. We begin with the reading from the Prophet Ezekiel.

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**Psalm response: On this most holy day**

Between each Vigil scripture readings we sing a psalm. The psalms are the prayers of humanity coming before God, reaching out to God, with praise, repentance, thanksgiving or lament. This psalm response combines several of the psalms used during the Easter Vigil liturgy, an expression of the wonder of this night. Let the joy of this piece seep into the crevices of your soul.

**Scripture reading: Let all who thirst**

This reading from the Prophet Isaiah, rather than being proclaimed in word, is presented as a song. Sometimes we hear scripture in a different way when it is sung to us. Let the lyrics and images wash over you like the water that washes and refreshes you. Bring to this moment all those places in your soul that may at this moment feel dry and barren. Remember what it feels like as water splashes on your face and wakens you to a new day.

**Glory to God**

Within the structure of the Vigil Liturgy of the Word, the "Glory to God" is traditionally inserted immediately at the conclusion of the readings from the Jewish Old Testament. As both a preparation and announcement of the New Testament scriptures, we now sing with a level of joy we've not yet expressed on this holy night. Imagine yourself being able to dance the joy of this age-old hymn that proclaims God glory.

**Easter Gospel and acclamation**

The church has always considered the proclamation of the gospel scripture to be one of the high points of any liturgy. To set this scripture apart from the rest, we sing the Gospel Acclamation, the "Alleluia," to announce the reading. Today is even more special because we are about to proclaim the Easter story itself, the announcement of God's victory over sin and death. Much like a trumpet fanfare, the acclamation rouses us to pay attention and to pay attention what what's about to happen. Even if you're along, I suggest that you stand for the acclamation and reading. This is the heart of our faith.

**Jesus Christ is risen today**

While the singing of a hymn at this point in the liturgy is not prescribed by the ritual, it is most appropriate that we allow ourselves a moment to affirm and acknowledge the good great news that we've just heard. This is not just any other Sunday. The story we've just heard is at the very heart of our faith. Singing this hymn allows us to make our own proclamation of the Easter news. As you sing this, imagine your church, filled to capacity, joining in this hymn with full heart and voice.

**Homily**

This Easter homily was given by Fr. John Baran, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Parish in Fairfield, Connecticut in 2017. Since then, John has made his own journey home into the arms of God.

**Renewal of baptism and profession of faith**

Dating to the early tradition of the church, Easter was the day when new members were welcomed into the community by baptism. The symbols of baptism permeate the Vigil liturgy. This is the time when the catechumens would make their profession of faith. It was also the time when the entire community is invited to renew their baptismal promises and make their profession of faith along the newly baptized. We are invited now to make those promises again and profess the faith we share.

**Preparation of altar and gifts**

This is the point during the liturgy that we dress the altar table and bring up our simple gifts of bread and wine. As you know, this moment is often, especially on feast days, accompanied by a hymn that we sing as the rituals are being completed. "Join in the Dance" is very much an Easter hymn. It's verses proclaim the victory of Christ over darkness and death. As you sing/listen, allow yourself to be carried away by the joy of the music. This moment prepares us to enter into the Great Prayer of Thanksgiving which follows.

**Prayer at the table: Mass of Christ the savior**

This solemn prayer marks the high point of the entire liturgy. The documents of the church call this prayer "the center and summit of the entire celebration." It's called the Eucharistic Prayer from the greek word "eucharistia," which means to give thanks and praise. Everything in this night's liturgy up till now has been leading us up to this moment where we proclaim our thanks and praise to a God who has blessed us with such abundance even in the midst of our darkness and brokenness. And so, together we lift our hearts in thanksgiving.

**Lamb of God litany**

The "Lamb of God" is a title for Jesus of Nazareth that appears in the Gospel of John. The lion-like lamb that rises to deliver victory after being slain appears several times in the Book of Revelation. And, of course, it's a direct reference to the Passover lamb whose blood the Israelites put on their doorposts to protect them from death. During much of history, the Lamb of God ("*Agnus Dei*") was sung with tropes verses each one expressing a different aspect of Christ. During a usual Mass, this song is sung as the baskets and cups are being prepared for distribution at communion. For us now

we can lay upon the sacrificial Lamb of God all the things that keep us from experiencing the fullness of God's life and grace.

**Communion hymn: Glory in the cross**

As on any other day, the Communion procession is about unity, a time for those present to move as one body to share in the Eucharistic banquet. And yet, this night is different in that we come here to celebrate an empty tomb. Death could not hold the son of God in its cold prison because our God's love is stronger than death. Just as death could not hold Jesus of Nazareth, so too death will never hold us, will never be the end for us. And even though we still live in the shadow of death, the victory has already been won. As we approach the supper of the Lord tonight, we do so with reassured confidence and hope. We can glory in the cross because it's no long a sign of defeat, but a sign of Christ's victory.

**Closing hymn: The wondrous news**

And now it is time for us to go forth, sent by Jesus Christ to be disciples of hope in the world. Surely this is a time in the story of humanity when hope is needed in a very real and particular way. We pray together that these days celebrating the Triduum might have nourished our own hope and will allow us to be beacons of hope to our brothers and sisters. And next year, may we again gather as community in our churches and chapels and embrace each other with the peace of Christ.

[Dan Schutte, an NCR board member, is the composer-in-residence at the University of San Francisco.]

This story appears in the **The Easter Triduum with Dan Schutte** feature series. View the full series.