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## “Sicut dixit”: Just as He Said

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April 19, 2025: Easter Vigil

*Somewhere in the inkwell of that night,  
or the shaken clarity of morning  
there was a moment that you knew his rising,  
and though faith may have led you to expect it,  
there's a difference between the shimmering lit  
shadow-rings beside a glass of water,  
and the drink itself. Where were you, Mother,*

*when you knew?*

*—Sally Read, “Mary’s Resurrection”*

Where was the Blessed Mother when she knew? This question seems inevitable in meditating upon Christ’s Resurrection and the fullness of joy it inaugurates. The first glorious mystery of the Rosary begs the question, even though Scripture withholds the answer. What was it like when the Blessed Mother first saw and believed that her Son had truly risen from the dead—just as he said?

While Christ appearing to his mother on Easter morning remains among those “many things which Jesus did” that no book is big enough to contain (Jn 21.25), a long tradition in Christian art and theology agrees about the likelihood of this encounter. The Eastern churches have tended to meditate on Mary keeping vigil at the

tomb. Where else would she have been during those dreadful hours after her Son's burial? St. Ambrose did not hesitate in his conviction that she was, of course, the first and the best to see, and to believe in, the resurrection of the Lord (*Vidit ergo Maria resurrectionem Domini: et prima vidit, et credidit*). The tradition in the West has since tended to imagine Mary keeping vigil *away* from the fray, perhaps in deference to her native humility. By the fifteenth century, she appears in paintings as if she has returned to the room where the angel first declared to her at the Annunciation. She has spent the night in prayer. It is no angel, however, but Christ himself who now witnesses her amazement.

The National Gallery, Washington, D.C., has in its collection a luminous version of Christ appearing to his mother on Easter morning, painted by a follower of the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Rogier van der Weyden. Mary has been kneeling at her *prie-dieu*, her little book of Scripture still open. She pivots on one knee to behold her son, who stands with his eyes looking down, his right hand raised in blessing. The mother's face is sleepless; her eyes are filled with sorrow. Yet Mary's hands are already raised in the delight of recognition, even before a smile has broken forth on her face. Those sorrowful eyes seem fixed on the nail hole in her Son's hand as it blesses her, almost as if she must behold the joys of Easter right through the embodied fact of his Crucifixion. Her own body, depicted as she pivots from kneeling to genuflection, from stillness to movement, from sorrow to joy, expresses well what the Church is recollecting at the Easter Vigil. Here we are, right on the pivot. A gentle breeze blows the banner that adorns the cross that Christ bears now as a staff, causing the pages of Mary's prayer book to turn. It is time to turn the page—for the old to yield to the new, for death to yield to life, for tears to yield to laughter. Mary's sorrowful keeping watch is over, and we know that because of the luminous presence of her Risen Son, taper-like in his stature. Now it all makes sense, just as the Scriptures had foretold—and just as he said. In the words of the fourth Psalm in the Vigil's lengthy sequence of readings:

At nightfall, weeping enters in,  
but with the dawn, rejoicing. (Psalm 30)

## Mary and the *Lucernarium*

St. John Paul travelled his own poetic and prayerful path into the mystery of the Blessed Mother and the Easter Vigil. The surfeit of symbols offered in this most elaborate of liturgies inspired his poem cycle, “Easter Vigil, 1966,” in which he reflects on one thousand years of Christian Poland. He likens human history to “walking on seams”—the precarious in-betweens where we discover our freedom, but also our dependence on God.

Through baptism, the earth itself has become newly intelligible in its sacramentality, its “seams” running with new life. The earth—with its light, its waters—has “become a ritual, / a sign of finding in which Man was found.” Here are the symbols that dominate the Vigil liturgy: the flames that give light to the Paschal candle, which in turn is used in the blessing of the baptismal waters. Wojtyla brings these images together when he describes man “reaching out for the light, with both hands / like someone rowing a boat.” But the light of Christ alone—not brute human force—is what we need. It is the *lumen Christi* that keeps afloat and aright the barque of the Church:

Faithful to you, earth, I speak of the light  
you cannot give me. I speak of the light  
without which no man is fulfilled,  
without which you, too, earth, cannot be  
fulfilled in man.

In his later papal homilies, these poetic reflections on the Easter Vigil—the *beata nox* of the Exsultet—continue to resonate, but they lose their starkness thanks to a palpable sense of ecclesial companionship, in particular in the company of Mary. Over the years, St. John Paul often imagined a grand cosmic fellowship at the Vigil: God himself is the night watchman and, in him, Mary, Church, and all creation attend to this night of nights. While all is dark, “God—the Light—*keeps watch*. With him there keep watch all who hope and trust in him.” No one could do this more perfectly than the Blessed Mother: “*O Mary, this is truly your night! As the last lights of the Sabbath are extinguished, and the fruit of your womb rests in the earth, your heart too keeps watch! Your faith and your hope look ahead.*” Meantime, the liturgical rites of fire and water, expounded upon in all the scriptural readings, summon the “whole created universe” to attend the nocturnal liturgy. Finally, the

Church keeps watch as she “closely scrutinizes the texts of Sacred Scripture” in the liturgy of the Word. This is the fellowship into which the newly baptized and all the faithful are invited.

The saintly pope seems also to have taken St. Augustine’s description of the Easter Vigil as “the mother of all vigils” to mean, quite literally, that there is something maternal about the night’s liturgy itself, when we renew our baptismal promises, “our rebirth in Christ through Baptism.” As St. Paul puts it, being baptized “into his death,” we enter into “newness of life” through his resurrection (Epistle). The cradle of this new life is the Church. Given the potency of all this imagery—darkness to light, death to life—it is strange to think that the Easter Vigil was only restored to the hours after nightfall in 1955. Since the late Middle Ages, the liturgy had been celebrated during the day, with the result that Holy Saturday became a premature Easter celebration, while the Vigil lost the sensory power of its dominant symbols. With the liturgy restored to the true darkness of night, however, following the long strangeness of Holy Saturday, the light of Christ really can break forth, flooding the nave as it is shared and multiplied. Then comes the Exsultet—the Church’s own Magnificat—that breaks forth into a poetic celebration of all that this night symbolizes and signifies:

Rejoice, let Mother Church also rejoice,  
arrayed with the lightning of his glory,  
let this holy building shake with joy,  
filled with the mighty voices of the peoples.

The Exsultet reminds us five times that “this is *the* night” on which all redemption history makes sense. This is the night when Christ rose victorious and on which the Paschal candle is lit that will burn to the end of time. This is the night when no nervous deacon should be shy about chanting the poem’s bold proclamation that all things have been fulfilled in Christ. The great symbols convene on this night of *symbolon*, when the one who scatters and separates (*diabolos*) has been definitively vanquished. Indeed, as St. John Paul put it in 1996, this is more than a night of mere symbol—this is the night when “symbols give way to reality.”

### **Reading with Mary**

The Vigil’s grand sequence of readings should be read in light of all this sacramental splendor. Depictions of Christ appearing to his mother often take the artistic license of showing her being roused from meditation on the

Scriptures by the arrival of her Risen Son. Can we imagine reading as she might have read that night, overcome with sorrow but on the cusp of joy? Pope Benedict noted that when the Vigil's first reading calls us all the way back to Genesis 1, "the Church reads the account of creation as a prophecy. In the resurrection, we see the most sublime fulfillment of what this text describes as the beginning of all things. God says once again: 'Let there be light.'" This is surely the way to encounter all the Vigil's Old Testament readings: as prophecies newly intelligible in the light of redeeming grace; as sublime fulfillments of what has been given and promised from the beginning. With Mary, we can read the Scriptures both *remembering* what was done and *acknowledging* its fulfillment. With Mary, we are on the pivot of redemption history. This is the night in which we can boldly enter into her confidence—which sustained her in sorrow but issues spontaneously into joy. As the lovely rhyme of the Regina Caeli puts it, *resurrexit / sicut dixit*. What he said is what he did.

The Magnificat is already an example of Mary reading Scripture in this manner: a remembering of what has been promised *and* bold confidence in the fulfillment of these promises. What do we discover in the liturgy's sequence of readings when we try to read as she might have read? How might she have received the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, having just climbed Calvary and stood at the foot of the Cross as Christ accomplished his redeeming sacrifice? How did the witness of Abraham's faith console her through that trial (Reading II)? What hope would rise in her as she read how God protected the Israelites with the pillars of cloud and fire, parting the Red Sea to clear their path to safety (Reading III). What consolation would she draw from the Lord's promise that his "covenant of peace" will never be broken nor his love ever leave her (Reading IV)? What deep thirst would be assuaged in her when she read the invitation in Isaiah 55, "Thus says the LORD: / All you who are thirsty, / come to the water!" (Reading V). Would she have recognized her own special privilege—and the gift of Christian life—in Ezekiel's prophecy: "I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, / taking from your bodies your stony hearts / and giving you natural hearts" (Reading VII). In a similar manner, the Psalms that follow each reading can be read on this blessed night as the Psalms of Mary and of the Church, remarkable consolations that encourage us to await restoration even in unfathomable anguish: "Our soul waits for the Lord, who is our help and our shield." We magnify the resurrected Lord as we ponder his sacrifice prefigured then and accomplished now.

## Seeing and Believing at the Tomb

St. Ambrose's conviction that Mary must have been the first to both *see* and *believe* in her Son's Resurrection belongs alongside his reflections on the other devoted women, who rush to the tomb to anoint Christ's body, as soon as dawn breaks and the Sabbath restrictions are lifted. In the light of day, having endured the night, the women set forth in love, but they experience a kind of blindness when they see the stone rolled away. They, too, are about to pivot from sorrow to joy, but—unlike the Blessed Mother—they first stumble into doubt. Our translation tells us that they were “puzzled”; they have not yet seen aright or believed. The two bedazzling angels terrify them, causing them to bow their faces to the ground, whether in physical pain to the eyes or spiritual pain to the heart. The angels offer the Easter tidings to them in the simplest, gentlest terms: “He is not here, but he has been raised.” Then, as if recognizing that pedestrian movement of the human soul that distinguishes our capacity to know and understand from theirs, the angels encourage the women, step by step, to “Remember what he said to you.” Only following this angelic encouragement do the women finally recall what Christ had told them and enter into the confidence that it really is just as he said it would be.

The angels have helped the women to pivot from sorrow, through their doubt, and into Easter joy by recalling Christ's promises and recognizing their fulfillment. While they, too, are now reading the signs like Mary, their own announcement of this news to the apostles does not go well. If the women were puzzled by the empty tomb, the disciples—away from the physical proof of the stone rolled away—think they are talking nonsense. The notable exception is Peter. We can interpret his running to the tomb, his “stooping and looking in,” as another moment of seeing on its way to believing (cf. John 20.8). He must bend down, lowering himself, to peer inside the tomb. Level with the darkness, he sees signs of life—the “burial cloths alone.” He goes home “wondering at what had happened.” Peter is not described here as puzzled or confused, like the women, but rather as in a state of wonder and awe. It is now his turn to be on the pivot. Having read the signs, he is teetering in faith toward Easter joy: *resurrexit, sicut dixit*.

In 2001, St. John Paul's evident affection for the Easter Vigil bubbled over into an apostrophe to the liturgy itself, in language more like his rhapsodic poetry than his homiletics:

O Vigil imbued with hope, you fully express the meaning of the mystery! O Vigil rich in symbolism, you disclose the very heart of our Christian existence! On this night, everything is marvellously summed up in one name, the name of the Risen Christ.

This winsome, prayerful ebullience is surely the most fitting type of expression for the occasion, which *should* overwhelm and excite us with its liturgical intensity, scriptural majesty, and theological mystery. This is the night for the language of glory, for an excess of words as the only alternative to speechlessness. St. John Paul's joyful words certainly suit how the tradition has imagined that Easter morning encounter between Mary and her Risen Son. On her face, marvelous surprise dawns after the long night watch. On her lips, speechlessness now yields to the best of all possible words: Christ Jesus! Alleluia! The meaning of the mystery now stands before us.

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### **For further reading**

James D. Breckenridge, "'Et Prima Vidit': The Iconography of the Appearance of Christ to His Mother," *The Art Bulletin* 39.1 (1957): 9-32

Christopher Carstens, *A Devotional Journey into the Easter Mystery* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Press, 2019).

[Sally Read, \*Dawn of This Hunger\* \(Brooklyn: Angelico Press \[Second Spring\], 2021\)](#). Quoted with kind permission from the author and Angelico Press.

Karol Wojtyła, *Collected Poems*, trans. Jerzy Peterkiewicz (New York: Random House, 1982)  
[Maxima redemptionis nostrae mysteria, General Decree for the Revised Order of Holy Week as Promulgated by Pope Pius XII, November 16, 1955](#)

Papal homilies at the Easter Vigil, [1979](#), [1996](#), [2000](#), [2001](#), [2002](#), [2004](#), [2009](#)

## **In short**

- The rich symbolism of the Easter Vigil invites us to ponder how we should make the turn from sorrow to joy, from tears to laughter, from fast to feast. The best model of how to greet the Easter tidings is the Blessed Mother.
- The liturgy offers a surfeit of sacramental symbolism—darkness and light, flame and water, night and day, death and life—that should overwhelm us in their splendor but also help us to interpret the Scriptures as they are laid out in the liturgy’s grand sequence of readings.
- A fruitful way to meditate on the readings is to consider how Mary might have read these readings, prophetically, as she kept vigil herself. We find promises made and kept throughout the liturgy of the Word. We can find in her hopeful, scriptural confidence the best model for how to greet the Risen Lord with Easter joy.

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