

The Great Easter Vigil

The liturgy intended as the first (and arguably, the primary) celebration of Easter in the BCP (pp. 284-95). It is also known as the Great Vigil. The service begins in darkness, sometime between sunset on Holy Saturday and sunrise on Easter, and consists of four parts: The Service of Light (kindling of new fire, lighting the Paschal candle, the Exsultet); The Service of Lessons (readings from the Hebrew Scriptures interspersed with psalms, canticles, and prayers); Christian Initiation (Holy Baptism) or the Renewal of Baptismal Vows; and the Eucharist. Through this liturgy, the BCP recovers an ancient practice of keeping the Easter feast. Believers would gather in the hours of darkness ending at dawn on Easter to hear scripture and offer prayer. This night-long service of prayerful watching anticipated the baptisms that would come at first light and the Easter Eucharist. Easter was the primary baptismal occasion for the early church to the practical exclusion of all others. This practice linked the meanings of Christ's dying and rising to the understanding of baptism.