



Dazzling Darkness

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Claire Nevin-Field
The Feast of the Resurrection ~ April 21, 2019*

Acts 10:34-43

Peter began to speak to Cornelius and the other Gentiles: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Psalm 118:14-17, 22-24

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| 14 The Lord is my strength and my song, *
and he has become my salvation. | and declare the works of the Lord. |
| 15 There is a sound of exultation and victory *
in the tents of the righteous: | 22 The same stone which the builders rejected *
has become the chief cornerstone. |
| 16 "The right hand of the Lord has triumphed! *
the right hand of the Lord is exalted!
the right hand of the Lord has triumphed!" | 23 This is the Lord's doing, *
and it is marvelous in our eyes. |
| 17 I shall not die, but live, * | 24 On this day the Lord has acted;
we will rejoice and be glad in it. |

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again." Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Is it just me, or does the world seem a scarier place lately? Natural disasters seem to abound. Places that are sacred and that we have all thought would always be there, like Notre Dame cathedral, up in flames—and this morning we heard of coordinated bombings of churches and hotels in Sri Lanka. Principles of how we treat each other in society, basic respect for the dignity of other human beings, how we live together in community, violated. We are divided as a nation. The poor and the vulnerable are being trampled underfoot. The deep seated evil that is racism is alive and loose and being acted on in ways some of us thought were in the past.. People seem tired, anxious, and scared. And on top of all of that, we at St. Peter's, have recently experienced the death of several long-time members—some unexpectedly. It can all feel rather overwhelming—and like something no other age has known. But as unique as all of this might feel to us, I suspect it is something people in every age have felt—it seems to be part of the human condition. As an 8th century Gregorian chant puts it, “In the midst of life, we are in death.”

And yet this morning we are here celebrating—celebrating Easter—we have trumpet, tympani, choir, fancy vestments, and flowers. We began the service by lighting a new Paschal Candle and joyfully proclaiming, after 40 long days of Lent, that Christ is Risen! Alleluia! The stone is rolled away and the bright sunshine reveals an empty tomb.

But despite the eternal brilliance of the light, this year I find myself drawn to the dark side of the story— “the darkness of the resurrection itself, that morning when it was hard to be sure what you were seeing.” —the disciples running around in the half light of dawn, filled with confusion. Was it an angel, sitting in that unlit tomb? Were those shadows grave clothes? The stranger lingering outside—a grave robber? The gardener? “Early in the morning, while it was still dark...” That’s where Easter begins—in the dark. Whatever happened in that tomb, whatever the specifics were of Jesus being raised from the dead, it is something that only God knows and it happened in total darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight illuminated the event. No human being witnessed it. And even now, two thousand years later, no human narrative can contain it. It exceeds all of our attempts to pin it down, because it’s a mystery known only to God. Whatever the resurrection was and is—its fullness lies in holy darkness, shielded from our eyes. All we can know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a dark night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow, in the utter darkness, God saved the world.

Earlier in my life, this lack of knowing the details would have frustrated me. I would have wanted evidence. Now it doesn’t frustrate me at all; it seems exactly right. Because what I have learned in the process of life, in the process of loving and grieving, in losing those I love, is that no story my tiny mind can contain would be big enough to redeem such catastrophic loss. Death is such an abyss, such a horror, such a violation—that nothing I can understand or explain will make it okay. Only a mystery as huge as the resurrection will suffice. Only my faith that God will somehow complete every story death interrupts, makes sense. Having seen death up close, certainty just does not seem necessary, or enough. I can only rest in mystery. Grief can only bear fruit in the dark.

In our Gospel story, Mary Magdalene sees Jesus first because she chooses to remain in the darkness. Peter and John leave when they see the empty tomb, but Mary stays, lingering at the grave, bewildered and bereft—staying present to witness to whatever happened and is happening. She does so even when what is real feels unbearable. Which seems to be the way of life—it seems to be true that clarity, hope, and healing come when we are willing to linger in hard and barren places, places where the usual platitudes fall flat, and all easy answers prove inadequate. Jesus comes in the darkness, and sometimes it takes a long time to recognize him. He doesn’t look the way we expect him to look. He doesn’t let us cling to our old ideas of him. He disappears again just as we grab hold of him. But he comes, he calls our names, and in that instant, we recognize both ourselves and him.

And if our response to that is to fret over doctrine, to work out the details of why and how, then I suspect we are on the wrong track. Our doctrines can easily be bent to conform to the darkness. The question of Easter is not whether or not we believe in the doctrine of the Resurrection. The question the Gospels are profoundly concerned with, really the only question that matters, is ‘Have you encountered the risen Christ? The disciples, the Gospel writers, knew that no doctrine has ever saved anyone, but that an encounter with the Risen One, well that can and does change everything.

As I go through life, struggling with grief over those who have died, with the pain and confusion that is part and parcel of human life, what matters isn’t words and explanations—what matters is encounter. What matters is encountering the risen Jesus, and finding in the mystery of his resurrected life the hope we need for our own. What matters is knowing deep in our bones the truth that, though it may not seem like it, new life in God

triumphs over death—over any of our tombs. What matters is seeing life through the prism of resurrection light—even and especially when things look darkest, because that is when God does God’s best work. What matters is knowing and proclaiming the hope that is deep within us—the sure and certain hope that in the midst of darkness we are in light—knowing that because he lives we live—that in the midst of death we are alive. Poet R.S. Thomas describes these sometimes only visible in hindsight encounters this way in his poem, “The Answer”:
There have been times/when, after long on my knees/ in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled/from my mind, and I have looked/in and seen the old questions lie/ folded and in a place/by themselves, like the piled/graveclothes of love’s risen body.”

This Easter, may the Christ who rose in darkness lead us into new life, new light, and new hope. May we know him in the half-lit places, the shadowy places, the hard places. May we dare to linger at the graveside until he calls our names. And may we then run from the tomb to share with hope the news of God's greatest mystery. I have seen the Lord! Christ is Risen. Alleluia! Amen.