

John 20: 11-18

In the Dark

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I don't usually get up before daybreak. But the few times I have been out before dawn it has been an amazingly spiritual experience. Often the spiritual part of the experience would take me by surprise. I remember one cold morning last December when we heard about a deal at the gym for a great annual fee to the first 100 people in line at 6 a.m. Someone at the gym told us all the gym regulars did this. So we set the alarm for 4:30 a.m., drove through abandoned streets and blinking stoplights – second-guessing ourselves the whole way. Quite to our surprise, when we reached the gym worried that we had arrived too late- the line was so long, full of people who had beat us to this place in the dark. There, fortified with steaming mugs of tea, joined the cue waiting for the doors to open, as we watched the first pale light bleed into the black ink on the horizon.

Maybe you rise early to catch the commuter train, or go to your own gym to work out while the rest of us are at our slumber. Maybe you fly out of Logan before dawn, or gaze out the window while a toddler plays at your feet or an infant cuddles in your lap and know what it is to watch the sky come to life. You know the breathtaking qualities of dawn- that mysterious hinge between night and day. There, as the air almost holds its breath before the day begins in earnest, there is a sense of wonder, a spiritual flavor in the atmosphere.

At Easter we join Mary in the garden at dawn. The gospel of John begins the story by telling us in verse 1 that it all started . “Early in the morning on the first day of the week, while it was still dark”.

While everyone else was asleep, Mary arose early while it was still dark. She hiked out to the cemetery under the black sky. There in the pitch night she discovered the tomb was open. Peering inside, she looked in vain for Jesus. The Bible story leaves us wondering what happened to Jesus. Where did he go? Who came to get him? What do we make of this? Where are the clues? How do we get our bearings as we stand with the disciples next to an open tomb?

In the first place the Easter story tells us that God's greatest miracles often take place in the dark. On Easter, to her utter astonishment, Mary discovered that Jesus was long gone. Somehow her rabbi had vanished into the darkness. Mary was too late to see him. God had come under cover of night, lifted him up, and taken Jesus away. Why did it happen this way? Why did God perform the greatest miracle of all when no one could witness it? If God was looking for a following, wouldn't it be smarter to make these things happen at noon?

But, the Bible is full of examples of God doing some of the best work – all in the dark. There is something about the darkness that often sets the stage for God's creativity. In the beginning of time God hovered over the dark soup of primordial seas and created the earth and all that is in it out of a shadowy void.

The pattern is everywhere. One night God woke Abraham and asked him to take a walk outside his tent to gaze at the stars together, and there in the darkness, God promised Abraham children, descendants as many as the stars in the heaven. Therein the dark God called Abraham to walk with him on a faith journey that would change his life. When the Hebrews escaped from slavery and traveled through the wilderness, God came to their camp every night under the cover of darkness and dropped manna- food from heaven so that the people could awaken to find the miraculous edible moss waiting for them at dawn. It was in the darkness that God sent a baby to Mary and Joseph, a child born to be the Light of the world. In the darkness shepherds heard the choir and came to see for themselves.

He points out that the Jews start the Sabbath at sunset. The day does not start at dawn or even midnight. No, it starts at sunset when the people are going to rest and sleep. Dorothy Butler Bass writes: "This way of keeping time inaugurates each day with fertile darkness of divine activity. God renews our lives in the dark while we sleep in advance of our actions." "The first part of the day passes in darkness...but not in activity. God is out growing crops even before the farmer is up and knitting together the wound before the clinic opens" {from Receiving the Day Ibid}

Finally, we often miss God's miracles because we look in all the wrong places.

Mary was not the only disciples up early. When she could not find Jesus, she summoned the others and they came to search for their own evidence. They started their own amateur forensic work. They verify Jesus' disappearance. They shake their heads and run away. They miss the miracle of Easter, because they are looking for facts, for evidence,

or something conclusive that you can see with your eyes. Mary does it differently. She waits, crying, and meets a man she does not recognize. As they speak, she feels the truth she cannot see. She realizes that Jesus is alive.

I am indebted to Benjamin Stewart, a dean at Lutheran Seminary in Chicago for the idea for this sermon. It seems so obvious, now that he mentioned it in an article in Christian Century, but in truth I never saw it quite this way before. Stewart says that God often comes in the dark. {Stewart, Benjamin M. "Reflections on the lectionary", Christian Century March 20, 2013}

Our challenge is to avoid the keystone cops approach to this story which characterized the disciples. Our challenge is to see with our hearts what our eyes may never comprehend. **The reason so many people have trouble with Easter is because they want proof. The reason so many of us miss the miracles all around us every day is because we cannot see them in the daylight.**

We have all known unexplained miracles that happened to us under the cover of darkness. We have all known times when we went to bed worried about something that was hard - hard to handle or hard to understand. We have woken with a new approach to our problem, or a new insight that came to us from a place we could not explain or explain away. We have all seen newborns who came into this world after spending many months in the darkness, while God presided over a series of miracles we could not see or begin to understand as several cells gave way to a set of biological systems so complex scientists still marvel. God's miracles are all around us – the human brain is a miracle.

We wake every morning to awash in a sea of miracles and still we scratch our heads. The skeptic in us, among us, mutters, looks for explanations, wants fact and, in the absence of concrete proof, we nurse our doubts.

There is a story in the Bible about Jacob. One night Jacob was on a journey, and it got dark and he found a stone for a pillow and went to sleep. While he was sleep, he dreamed of a ladder to heaven. Angels were going up and coming down between heaven and earth all night long. When he awoke Jacob sat up in his bed and re-called his dream. The Bible says that Jacob said, "Surely God was in this place, and I did not know." That story comes early on in Genesis, at the very beginning of the Bible, but it sets a tone for everything that follows in those days and in ours. We wake up and wonder if God might have been here. We acknowledge that we did not see God, so we were never sure.

All we ever see of God are the fingerprints God leaves on the miracles all around us everywhere. That is all we can ever hope to find.

At home in the dark, God renews the world, in advance of our efforts. The faithful response is awe and gratitude.