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EASTER SUNDAY—CYCLE B

OUT OF THE DARK

The Texts: Acts 10:34a, 37-43; Colossians 3:1-4; John 20:1-9

Christ is risen! Alleluia! With angel choirs and all the hosts of heaven, we sing of our Lord's victory over death. The Gospels, indeed the entire New Testament and the Church Catholic throughout the ages, proclaim the mystery of faith: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Poet and preacher George Herbert gave wings to Easter faith when he wrote:

"Rise my heart, Thy Lord is risen.
Sing his praise
Without delays.
Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
With him mayest rise."

And yet, in John's telling of our Lord's triumph over death, we read a curious, even puzzling line at the very beginning of the story. Did you hear it? "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us, with varying sameness that the Easter curtain rises with the dawn of the day. Only here, in the Fourth Gospel, do we need a lamp to guide our way. Only here do we find the words "while it was still dark." What in the world is John trying to tell us?

Though Easter glows with resurrection light, the story begins when we get up in the night. "Very early, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb." Mary and the disciples had so many reasons to give up. In fact, as one of the Gospel writers records, Simon Peter was so frustrated with the emptiness, the loneliness, the guilt, the fear, the uncertainty, that he finally said, "I'm going fishing." And that is what he did.

When I say, "get up in the night," I'm not talking about some kind of naive optimism, some attitude that sees the brighter side of things saying, "Well, here is one side of the coin, but there is another." No, I'm not talking about that at all. I am saying that because Christ lives, there is a compelling reason to put all that is dark in our lives in the rearview mirror; not that we would forget it, but that it would get smaller and smaller as we move in Easter's direction.

Saying it and doing it, however, is another thing altogether. It is so difficult to get up in the night. There is so much about us that wants to sleep over, deny, even ignore, what is dark. The word "dark"

itself is shrouded in fear: dark rooms, dark emotions, dark-ness. I am told an African chieftain once said, “We know at night time somebody goes among the trees, but we never speak of it.” At night time, in the darkness, we all sense a presence out there in the darkness, but we don’t speak of it.

Easter faith does not deny the darkness. In fact, we who celebrate this Day are to do the opposite; we are to name the darkness. The Bible does not blink in saying that we are dead in our trespasses and sins, that there is nothing righteous about any one of us. And yet, our attitude toward faith is often more like a self-help lecture. “Clean up your life,” “Fix your past and insure your future.” “When I get the family right, the business right, my health right, when everything lines up the way I think it should be, then I’ll think about my spiritual life.” The Bible tells us from beginning to end that the very opposite not only must happen, but can happen, for all of us. In the night of life’s darkness, we stand to our feet trembling with fear and, with God’s help, name it. And by naming the darkness – whether it is guilt, or sin, or pride, or lust, or avarice, or whatever it may be – God frees us to stand and move toward the Easter light.

There is a beautiful, moving story in the Gospels about a father with a sick child. Jesus had come down from the mountain of Transfiguration. His disciples were trying to help a troubled father and his son. The son needed healing. In the dialogue that ensues, Jesus learns the disciples had probably caused more difficulty than help. Desperate, the father looks to the struggling son and then looks to our Lord and speaks words for all of us: “I believe. Help my unbelief.”

The Easter good news declares that God draws all lost, confused, hurting, broken lives from the dark toward the dawn. You say, “I don’t understand everything about God.” My friend, none of us understands everything about anything. Blaise Pascal said it beautifully: “When God wants to plant a truth in the human life, he plants it deeper than the mind. He places it in the instinct.” And our instincts, placed deep within us by God, summon us to move from darkness toward light, from night toward the day.

But what then? The story finally tells us the risen Lord finds us where we are. The message of Easter is not so much about disciples finding an empty tomb as it is about the risen Lord finding the disciples and their empty lives. Mary in her dark fear is looking for the risen Christ. Do you see the agitation? Can you feel her nervousness? She is looking here and there for her Lord. But all of her looking does not lead to her finding. Jesus, in risen life, finds her.

Here is the mystery that holds us with uncommon wonder. Easter faith is not coming to church on a spring morning to find Jesus. My friend, Easter is waking up in the darkness of our lives and discovering that God has found us. God has found us in Jesus’ death and resurrection. The risen Lord finds us all and speaks our name. And when he speaks our name, that instinctive longing to be related in love and loved by the One who made us, rises within us from its ashen death, and we are known, and we know, and by God’s grace become Easter people.

Such is the mystery of Easter: “On the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary came to the tomb.” The risen Lord, the living Christ, takes our hand and draws us from darkness to the light that is resurrection life. “Rise my heart, Thy Lord is risen.” Alleluia! Christ is risen! Alleluia! Amen.