

“At Deep Dawn”¹

Acts 10:34-43, Luke 24:1-12

April 20, 2020

Easter Sunday

First Presbyterian Church

The Resurrection of Jesus

24 But on the first day of the week, at deep 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.

Sermon

Some of you know that I am an early riser. Though these days I’m not quite as energetic as I once was, it’s not uncommon for me to be up and going before some have hit the snooze for the first time. Yet for all the mornings I have been up with that rooster who lives somewhere near us... I’ve never once heard the “*crack*” of dawn... never once seen the “*break*” of the new day. My experience is that dawn doesn’t so much “break” or “crack” as it unfolds... that night’s darkness turns itself, one tiny atom at a time, into the new day’s light.² I’ve had that experience on early morning runs... leaving the house in complete darkness, yet at some point there is a turning... and if you’re up and out at this time you know there’s a murkiness about it... you can make out shapes, but nothing is really clear. I wonder if this is what Luke is describing when he says that on that first Easter Mary and the other women came to the tomb at “early dawn.” Literally, the word is translated “deep dawn” – it is that time of day when you are still in the dark and just can’t be sure what you are seeing.

It was sometime toward the middle of a Monday afternoon in the early fall of 1971. My father had spent most of the day in surgery having a tennis-ball size tumor removed from his brain. When the surgeon came out to meet us – hair pressed against his head, sweat stains on his scrubs – he told us Dad had come through fine, but that he wasn’t able to get it all... and that all signs pointed to cancer.

¹ The title and much inspiration for this sermon come from James S. Lowery’s sermon, “At Deep Dawn,” published in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2004, p.24-34.

² Ptomey, K.C., in his sermon “Deep Dawn,” preached April 12, 1998, Westminster Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN.

Knowing my dad would be in recovery several hours, my mother and I decided to take a walk. And I remember thinking, as we walked through the streets of downtown Atlanta, that *for us* this TIME was somehow different... that this TIME had the potential to change our family forever... and though for most folks this time was about keeping appointments or running errands or just walking on a lovely afternoon, for US it was different. Is this what Luke is describing when he says the women went to the tomb at “deep dawn?”³

More than just a time stamp in the morning, “deep dawn” is also a place; a place of confusion and grief; a place of anger and fear... a place of not seeing and not knowing. At deep dawn the boss calls you in to tell you of changes. The doctor calls you over to tell you the results. The school calls to tell you of the closing. The rehab and recovery haven’t gone as well as hoped. The chair that she sat in all those years is now empty. It’s deep dawn.⁴ **It is the place where dreams have crumbled** and plans are out the window... where one life has died, and no new life has risen out of it... everything looks murky, and nothing is really clear. It is the time when the promises you base your life on are either true or not... and you are not sure which it is.

It’s interesting that all the other Gospel writers FOCUS on the actual time of day the women went to the tomb... it’s only Luke... Luke the theologian... Luke the poet... who moves us from the kind of time we measure on a clock to the kind of time we know in our heart. Deep dawn is not clock time, it’s soul time... time when you are still in the dark and cannot be sure what you are seeing... time when the promises you base your life on are either true or not... and you are just not sure which it is.

I, for one, really appreciate that Luke tells us it was “deep dawn” when the women came to the tomb and that they were “frightened” and “perplexed” at what they found... because that’s language that strikes a familiar chord in the human soul... at least in my human soul. Easter did not suddenly burst upon me with a blast of trumpets and flash of light. I have come to Easter much as the disciples of old came – slowly, oh so slowly – to the conviction that God’s plan was not derailed by Jesus’ death... slowly, oh so slowly – to the belief that there is always hope.

These women in Luke’s Gospel come to the tomb at deep dawn and they find two men waiting there... two men waiting in the darkness for them.⁵ We’re not told who these men are. Some say they are angels. Some say they are Elijah and Moses. But whoever they are... they frighten the women... and they chide the women... and then they instruct the women... to do just one thing... they say... remember. Remember. They don’t mean rote recitation of names and places and dates. They don’t mean a mechanical shifting of index cards. They say – remember Jesus. Remember Jesus... go back and put him all together so vividly that it’ll be like he is right there with them. Call Jesus to mind...⁶ See his mannerisms... see how he cocked his head to one side when he listened... hear again the sound of his voice and the tenor of his speech patterns when he taught... smell the clothes on his shoulders... feel the calluses on his carpenter’s hands.

³ Lowery draws upon the work of Rick Spalding for this translation of the text in a paper presented to the Moveable Feast in 1998. See also Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, S.J., *The Gospel According to Luke*, Anchor Bible, p. 1544.

⁴ “Early Dawn,” a sermon for February 27, 2016 by Rev. Christopher Crotwell.

⁵ This section of the reaction of the women follows Crotwell again.

⁶ Luke Timothy Johnson’s commentary on Luke is the source for the ideas on “remembering” (Sacra Pagina Series Vol 3.)

These dazzling men want these frightened and perplexed women. This is to be deep remembering... in the deep dawn. And so, the women do! They remember... How Jesus healed the demoniac chained outside of town. How he told the paralyzed man to walk. How he gave sight to the blind man... and let the hemorrhaging woman touch him. How he fed more people than they could count... and let the Syrophenician woman have more than crumbs... And how he raised Jairus' daughter from the dead... how he said that little girl wasn't dead (even though she was) ... and then how he told her to WAKE UP! ... and she did... they remembered that!

And as these women (their tear streaked faces pressed to the ground) as they turn from the two men and look over to the empty tomb they remember MORE. They remember how Jesus didn't just talk about sacrificing... and how he didn't just talk about dying... he did both of those things. And then they remember how Jesus also talked about rising... rising from the grave on the third day... and as they remember, I'm imagining something shifts inside the women... things start falling into place... and they begin to see more clearly... and to believe it might be true.

Now I realize it doesn't actually SAY that in Luke's gospel... but they must have recognized something unexpected was happening... because it wasn't long before they dropped the burial perfumes and took off running to tell the others what they had found. Somehow their deep remembering... turned into their passionate acting...⁷ as they scrambled off to tell the others about what they had seen. And I have to think that morning... as the women took to the road to tell others the news... the world became a little brighter.

Two men lean on the tombstone at the edge of the deep dawn... "Remember," they say... Call to mind the very presence of Jesus... and know he is risen... know he is alive... and know that because he lives... you will too... And then, let that deep REMEMBERING turn into passionate LIVING.

Every new life begins in the darkness of the womb [xi]
Every new plant starts as seed in the darkness of the soil
Every new idea begins in a brain encased in the darkness of a skull [xii]
Every new day begins while the sun is on the far side of the world

Is it such a surprise that Easter begins in the deep dawn? The first Easter started in the dark.
Our Easters still do.

⁷ This idea of "deep remembering becoming passionate acting" is from K.C. Ptomey.