

Light Comes Out of the Darkness

John 20:1-18

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There are three fantastic beginnings in our Bible, three passages that tell readers that they are embarking upon an amazing, poetic journey. There are other, smaller beginnings that are also eloquent and powerful, but I will argue that there are three beginnings that really knock it out of the park, three beginnings that are worth hanging the whole of our faith on.

The first one, fittingly, comes in Genesis, right at the start of the scripture itself. The words of Genesis 1:1 are memorized and repeated all over the place, even by small children or by those who have never set foot in a church. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” introduces the story of creation with appropriate gravitas and grandeur. God, in this image, is a behemoth architect setting the wheels of universe into motion.

It is such a great beginning that the author of John decides to mimic it when launching his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” John’s first verse highlights mystery more than certainty, but this is still pure poetry that captivates and consumes anyone who listens to it. The first sentence of John claims that the story John is about to tell is just as important and eloquent and magnificent as the very creation of our world.

And the third beginning, as you have probably guessed, is the passage from today. But if these verses from the 20th chapter of John hadn’t been our scripture reading, this might have been a harder passage to identify as a great beginning. For one thing, it doesn’t start with “In the beginning,” so it naturally doesn’t get compared to the others as often.

For another, both “In the beginning” passages are told from an altitude of several thousand feet. They offer a universal perspective, concerned with the heavens and the earth and not so much with individual people. But the story of Mary at the tomb is deeply concerned with individual people. We learn (most of) their names. We follow along as they run and hesitate and weep and gasp and attempt to hug. The verbs in Genesis 1 and John 1 are nearly all “be” and “say” and “come” verbs, and God is the one taking action in these verbs. The verbs in today’s scripture are extraordinarily human.

Because this is a more personal story it is also more detailed. Mary comes first, she goes to Peter and the beloved disciple, the two of them take off, Peter loses the footrace but the other disciple pauses before entering the tomb, Peter therefore enters first, they find linen wrappings and the cloth from Jesus’ head—but the cloth isn’t with the other linen wrappings; it’s over here...as he did in last week’s scripture, John continues to provide piles and piles of details, not bothering to explain them but instead leaving it up to us to know what they all mean or why they’re important. Regardless of their meaning, the details create a story about specific people dealing with particular events, not with a God summoning planets or the existence of a mysterious Word. The action of this story is grounded on Earth, not stretched across the heavens.

Despite these differences, the story of the empty tomb *is* the Christian origin story. This is where we really get going. Jesus' return to Earth is what separates him from the prophets who preceded him—once the resurrection happens, there is no room left to view him as merely a good teacher or a prescient reformer. Starting with the verses of this story, we are wholeheartedly embracing a new reality, a new truth.

And while John does not start this chapter with “In the beginning,” he comes pretty close by choosing “Early on the first day of the week” to start this narrative. Again, because the details of the story aren't cosmic in nature, “In the beginning” would sound a little forced, but John still emphasizes that it was “early” and chooses to call it “the first day of the week” instead of “the last day of the weekend.” There is an emphasis from the beginning that this narrative *is* a beginning.

There is (at least) one other significant commonality across these three passages. In the second verse of Genesis, we're told that there was darkness over the surface of the deep. When God fashions the heavens and the earth, speaking them into existence, the first spoken words by the grand Creator are “Let there be light.”¹ John's prologue features the same metaphor, “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”² And when John writes that Mary has come to the tomb early, at the start of the week, he also adds “while it was still dark.”

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There is a group of churches in downtown Raleigh that participates in an annual Easter sunrise service. Each year, a committee forms with leadership from these six or seven churches, and those folks then show up on Easter Sunday at the state capitol building at something like 5:30 in the morning with the service itself starting sometime around 6:00. When I was on staff at a downtown church, there was always a bit of a battle to see who would get stuck with this service—we liked working with the other churches, we loved celebrating Easter, but trying to be downtown that early was a huge challenge for all of us.

When I came onto staff, I was told that the newest hire went to the Easter sunrise service. I was the newest ministerial hire for three straight Easters. I have never been more excited about the hiring of a new associate. Someone asked me this week if Ridge Road had an Easter sunrise service, and I emphatically replied, “We do not.”

But...despite all of that, the first year I attended the downtown Easter sunrise service was pretty wonderful. Easter came relatively early that year, and it was one of those incredibly cold March mornings when we gathered on the capitol lawn, one of those mornings where 5:30 actually feels like 3:00 AM. Someone had brought coffee and hot chocolate, a brass band was playing softly, and yet it felt like we were doing something covert despite the presence of hot chocolate and a brass band.

I had a small role that morning—I think I read scripture—and so I mostly got to appreciate the service for what it was. And while I don't remember what was preached or spoken or sung, I do remember watching the sun rise up over the eastern horizon, staring at the soft glow as the sky turned from indigo to lavender to orange, and even *feeling* warmer as the world grew lighter.

¹ Genesis 1:2-3

² John 1:5

That, of course, is kind of the point of an Easter sunrise service. All who gather at the predawn hour are hoping to find themselves reliving the resurrection—the rising of the Son—as they watch our own sunrise. It's not a particularly complicated metaphor...but it is an incredibly effective metaphor, because light speaks to us the newness of life in a way that very few other things can.

These three passages characterize their beginnings as light coming out of the darkness. The darkness is nothing. The light, opposite that, is something—something new, something fresh, something inspiring, something filled with wonder, something miraculous, something that will change the way we encounter and understand our God, our world, and ourselves. These are the three dawns of the Christian faith: God created the world, God walked on Earth, God conquered death.

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Today, we of course focus on this third beginning, the beginning that comes with Easter. This third beginning demonstrates that our beginnings, our lights coming out of the darkness, arrive in cycles. When God created the Earth, that was a stupefying act of miraculous proportions. When Jesus was born—when God came to live among us—that was also an earth-shattering phenomenon. The miracle of Christ's birth did not undo the marvel of God's creation; instead, Christ's birth enhanced and built upon the wonder of creation. Likewise, Christ's resurrection did not undo the miracles which preceded it. Moreover, we have no reason to believe that our new beginnings end there. The cycle continues.

Our beginnings are foundational, yielding other new beginnings. This is where a major part of their hope comes from—we know that there is the hope for another beginning, for another light.

But the resurrection of the Christ in John 20, related differently from the creation and nativity stories, suggests that our future starting points will also be a little bit different. They likely will feel a little less celestial and a little more personal. They will require action of us—not just “being” or “saying” action, but running and weeping and embracing.

This third beginning and all subsequent beginnings in our lives are not ones that will happen to us or for us. They are ones in which we will play a role.

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The action required of us is demonstrated in this passage from John—the things that Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple do are things that inform how we approach a situation that has the potential to be a new beginning. The first of these is the one action that all three of them demonstrate: we (like they) run. When Mary discovers the empty tomb, she runs to Peter and the other disciple; they, in turn, run to the tomb, with John detailing their running so we can't overlook it. This is the only time John will use the word we translate as “run;” that word's infrequency also suggests that something special is going on here.

Mary, Peter, and the beloved disciple may run because they are afraid, or excited, or even confused...but whatever they are feeling, they are feeling something urgent. New beginnings are characterized by a sense of urgency, by a group compelled toward action that they dare not resist.

Churches—maybe all groups of people acting collectively, but certainly churches—have a tendency to eschew action instead of embracing it. We're much better at doing things methodically instead of urgently. But John's account of the resurrection does not feature the future leaders of the church moving methodically; it describes them moving quickly and decisively. It describes them—all of them—running.

To be fair, it doesn't describe them *always* running. In particular, the beloved disciple—who is, apparently, the best runner of the bunch—arrives at the tomb and then lingers carefully. The beloved disciple (always identified simply this way and never by name) is constantly depicted in John as a positive role model, so there's reason to believe that both his running and his hesitation is admirable. He reminds us that urgency without contemplation is foolhardy. Quick, even impassioned action is healthy and important—they all run—but thoughtless action is just wasted energy.

At this point, the boys leave. If this were a masculine-dominated narrative, then the only lesson we'd learn about the actions we take at new beginnings would be to act swiftly but thoughtfully. But Mary Magdalene remains, and it's a good thing she does. We have twice as much to learn from Mary as we do from the men.

Mary remains because she is overwhelmed by the emotions of this new beginning. She has discovered the tomb, assumed a grave robbery, run to the disciples, run back to the tomb, been left alone again, and she needs a moment to gather herself. She needs the space to cry.

Often we approach life and its new beginnings, approach scripture and faith, with a mind hoping to understand, to make sense, to outwit. When we debate appropriate protocol, it is an entirely intellectual argument. When we hope to comprehend law, scripture, or philosophy, we do research and look for objective truths.

Mary, on the other hand, stands weeping.

If we want to understand the power of the risen Christ—if we want to grasp this new beginning and all of its import—then we have to approach it not only with our minds but also with our hearts.

After the resurrected Jesus appears to Mary, she takes action in four other ways that are standards for us. First—and this action seems to be the pinnacle of her experience, the apex that everything preceding builds up to and everything following resonates from—first, she listens. It is when Jesus calls her "Mary," saying her name, that she understands who he is. This is not like one of those scenes in a sitcom where someone is so caught up in her own grief or priorities that she misses the main thing and it has to be repeated several times for comedic effect. Mary is listening.

Because she is listening, she recognizes the truth that stands in front of her. It is a literally unbelievable truth. We are not supposed to rise from the dead. That's simply not how it works...but Mary still recognizes that this is what has happened. And, despite the fact that this should defy all human expectation, she believes what she is seeing.

Finally, Mary goes back to the disciples and tells them what has happened, what she has seen, and what Jesus has spoken. These are the actions of the resurrection, actions that humanity undertakes: we run, we pause, we weep, we listen, we recognize, we believe, and we announce. This is the light coming out of the darkness.

What this means is that—while Jesus is most definitely the light that comes out of the darkness—we are also, in Him, that light. We have an active role in the new beginning that is the resurrection of the Christ. We get to choose to run and weep and believe and announce.

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Without the cue of “In the beginning,” it might seem a stretch to suggest that these verses intend to convey such a monumental genesis...but it is impossible to overstate the miracle of Christ’s resurrection. We can explain away waters parting and storms calming due to atmospheric phenomena; we can rationalize the feeding of the hungry and the cure of disease...but to emerge from a tomb three days after burial is, like the creation of the universe and the idea of God walking among humanity, an act of undeniably divine proportions.

And yet...it is available to us to participate in. It is a miracle on the grandest scale that we nevertheless hold in our hand.

This is the light coming out of the darkness: mesmerizing, inexplicable, pure, miraculous...and yet widespread, common and familiar. This is Easter.