

The Luminous Darkness

John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, (April 9) 2023

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Even the darkness is not dark to you.

The night is as bright as the day,

For darkness is as light to you.

-Psalm 139:12

Enroute to the floor of the ocean the diver first passes through the 'belt of the fishes' ... the wide band of light reflected from the surface. ... then to a depth of water that cannot be penetrated by light... it is dark, foreboding, and eerie. ... Dropping deeper into the abyss, slowly his eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness.

-Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*

Easter always begins in the dark.

John says, “Early on the first day of the week while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb” (20:1). Perhaps she had been up all night, couldn’t sleep, and decided to head for the tomb as soon as she could. After all, it had been topsy-turvy week. Indeed, the last three days were literally hell on earth. I wonder if she walked down the road in the dark with what WWII journalists called “the thousand-yard stare,” a look of dissociation, detachment from her surroundings and from herself, so that she was simply putting one foot in front of another as she trudged past other crosses, some with corpses on them, and others with victims still moaning.

The week had begun with a loud shout of acclimation as Jesus came into the city on the back of a donkey, but it ended with his betrayal, arrest, sham trial, torture, lynching, and death. Through a couple of friends in high places, Jesus' corpse was removed from the cross and placed in a borrowed tomb.

All this had happened so fast, that no one had time to give Jesus a proper burial. No spices, no ointments, no oils. No respect given the dead. Nothing. So early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene shows up at the tomb to do what was proper.

The fact that Mary shows up is no small thing. Given what we just recounted she had gone through and witnessed, showing up in the dark alone is a big deal. Let's think about this. Showing up is always a big deal. It's the first step in Christian discipleship. If you're going to follow Jesus, it begins with showing up. Being present – physically, mentally, and spiritually. Church is first about showing up. Show up for worship. Show up to serve. Show up, not only for what we'll receive, but more – showing up for others. Prayer is first about showing up. God is there and if you want to meet God in prayer, you have to show up, no matter if prayer is in church, beside your bed, or sitting in a particular place. It's also true of any relationship worth anything, you have to show up. Marriage and family, and true friendships always begin with showing up. To have trust, build trust, and be trustworthy you learn to show up. To be present. People count on you, others need you, and God is looking for you. Show up.

Mary shows up.

In the dark.

In the Bible, in the New Testament, in the Gospels, and especially in John, darkness and night are never simply about the evening or that the sun is down or not yet up. Darkness and night have a thickness of meaning, full of symbol and metaphor. So does light and daytime. And in John the opposition of light and darkness is a major theme. Darkness and night partner closely with Death and Evil. Darkness is also about confusion, uncertainty, flux, chaos, blindness, falsehood, close-mindedness, and hard-heartedness. Light has to do with illumination, judgement, revelation, understanding, healing, goodness, and life. Light is about hope. It is the function of light to shine precisely in the darkness, to oppose darkness, to dispel darkness. The light shines, still is shining, never ceases to shine.

Right off, in the first chapter and fifth verse of John's Gospel he writes, "The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." And he continues in the first chapter and beyond with light and darkness imagery. In John 3 Nicodemus comes to see Jesus at night, when it is dark. And Jesus says to Nicodemus, "And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil" (John 3:19). In other words, we become lovers of darkness because the darkness is in us as well as around us.

John 12 begins Holy Week with Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Afterwards, Jesus has a conversation with some Greek-speaking Jews in town for Passover. At the conclusion of his comments he says, "If you walk in darkness, you do not know where you are going" (John 12:35). In the next chapter, after supper and after Jesus washes the disciples' feet, it speaks of Judas leaving in order to betray Jesus, "He immediately went out. And it was night" (John 13:30).

Jesus' praying and agonizing in the Garden of Gethsemane while the disciples sleep, all happens at night. It is night, in the dark that Judas' betrayal and the arrest by the soldiers and the Religious Authorities all occur. Jesus' sham trial before the High Priests and the Roman governor happens in the dark at nighttime.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that it was daytime when Jesus was crucified and died, but that darkness covered the land (Matthew 27:45; Mark 15:33; Luke 23:44).

When Jesus' corpse was taken to the tomb, the tomb was nothing more than a cramped, dark hole in the side of a rocky hill. All four of the Gospels say that the women went to the tomb that Sunday morning while it was still dark. John says Mary Magdalene goes alone – in the dark. They went to the place of Death in the darkness that represented Death. The time and the place where there is no human hope; where there is only despair and defeat and diminishment.

All week has been an entering into darkness. And as the week has proceeded, the darkness intensifies, much like a narrowing tunnel. And by early Sunday morning, while it was still dark, we approach the tomb with Mary. The realm of Darkness and Death has deepened so that all that Darkness and all that night represents in this story, is compressed into that one cramped hole in the side of the hill with a massive stone covering the entrance.

Right there, that one cramped hole with a stone across it, is the ultimate Black Hole. From what I've read, Black Holes in space cannot be seen by human eyes because it is a place in space where gravity pulls so much that even light cannot get out. So, think of the tomb containing the corpse of dead Jesus as the

ultimate Black Hole, where Death and Darkness are so great that Light cannot get out. It is the ultimate unknown, uncertainty, and unfamiliar.

And it is where Mary, and the other women show up. This Easter morning, hear me on this: to follow Jesus is always to be led into the darkness. Sooner or later, if we show up, and if we stick with him, we will end up in the dark night, standing at the entrance to a dark hole, where everything we've conventionally known has become chaos.

One of the reoccurring issues sometimes in Christian history, especially nowadays with White Christian Nationalism is the intense effort to regain control of Jesus, the Bible, the church, the faith, and also the nation. I've just said that to follow Jesus is to enter the unknown and live by faith and trust. But instead, Christian Nationalism and much Fundamentalism seeks to nail Jesus to a cross to control him, put him in a tomb with a massive stone covering the entrance, put yellow police tape around it, pass out guns to everyone, put up blockades, have armed guards at the entrance. Keep Jesus in the past. Be sentimental about how Jesus used to be. Today, there is too much change, and a resurrected Jesus walking among us is a threat. We try to control Easter and instead of faith we immediately want to rush back to certitude. As soon as we come to darkness, we look for the light switch.

The Cross, the Tomb, the Darkness, and Easter say not everything is going to be like we remember it used to be. We cannot control it.

But if we show up with Mary, the other women, and eventually Peter and John, we will keep walking into the darkness and discover that the stone has been rolled away, the police tape is broken, the guards have fled, and the Living God is at work. Not under our control but beyond it.

Easter always begins in the dark – but it doesn't end there.

One of the great saints of the faith from the 1940's through the early 1970's and a mentor to Martin Luther King, was Howard Thurman. Thurman had a student who was a deep-sea diver, describe in a paper what it's like to go down into the deep, into the darkness. The student said that at first you pass through the "belt of fishes." This is a wide band of light reflected from the surface of the sea. When you keep going deeper, you will come to a depth of water that cannot be penetrated by light from above the surface. It is dark, foreboding, disorienting, and eerie. The student said the diver's immediate reaction is fear and sometimes a sudden spasm of panic. But if you keep going, keep going deeper and deeper into the abyss, slowly your eyes begin to pick up the luminous quality of the darkness; what was fear is relaxed and you move into the lower region with confidence and peculiar vision.

The student's paper reminded Thurman of Psalm 139: 11-12, "If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,' even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is light to you" (see Howard Thurman, *The Luminous Darkness*, Prologue).

What Thurman knows is what Christian mystics have long known. Instead of fleeing from the darkness, sometimes you have to go deeper. The Christian mystical tradition has produced such works as the 14th century *The Cloud of Unknowing*, which said the way to know God is let go what we think we know about God and be courageous enough to surrender one's mind and soul to the realm of "unknowing." Then we might begin to truly know God. Or St. John of the Cross, a protégé of St. Teresa of Avila in 16th century Spain. John of the Cross wrote about the "dark night of the soul."

I could go on. This Christian teaching is that when we're in the dark night of the soul, we keep on going in and do not rush back to the certitude of light. When we're not certain of the way, we trust God, and we'll discover God in ways we've never known before. But like Mary we have to keep showing up even when it's dark.

Part of our willingness to keep showing up, is the realization that sometimes darkness is not so much about Death as much as it is about the unknown. It's about inscrutability. It's not necessarily bad, it is simply not known. Therefore, we can hope. Who knows what God is doing in that darkness?

According to the various Gospel stories, Mary Magdalene, the other women, and Peter and John, come to the dark tomb to discover the stone rolled away. What's more, they look inside, even go inside. They don't back off. But once inside the dark tomb, they discover what the feminist theologians say, "that the tomb becomes a womb." There are angels of the Lord, glowing bright as lightning, and they are pointing us to the New Creation and the new birth. "Why look for the living among the dead. He is not here; he is risen."

In John's version of the story, there is a lot of running here and there, going into the tomb and coming out. Mary wonders in the garden and sees a guy she thinks is a gardener until he calls her by name, "Mary," and suddenly the light comes on and she recognizes the Risen Jesus. She grabs him, tries to hold on, but the Resurrected Jesus says, "Don't hold on. Let go. I've much more to do and I'm going ahead of you." For those of us who read John, this garden is the New Garden, harbinger of the New Creation.

We don't know what had happened in that dark tomb, that ultimate Black Hole that contained the corpse of Jesus. Somehow or another, by the power of the

Living God, the very place of darkness so strong that no light could escape, became the epicenter of the Living Light of the Universe exploding into our dark world. Think about it, after all, Matthew says there was an earthquake.

Most of you will remember Ray Roberson, whom we buried about five years ago. Early in his cancer, Ray went in for surgery, radical surgery that would put him deeply into an induced coma, the doctor came to him and said, “Ray, I’m going to need you today. I’m going to need you to help me. I’m going to take you down into a deep, dark place and leave you there. But I want you to know that you’ll not be alone. The Lord will be there with you. And with the Lord’s help, you’ll need to climb out of that dark place. I wouldn’t take you there if I didn’t think you could do it.” Ray said he remembered the sense of being in a deep dark hole with light at the top and he remembers struggling to climb out. But climb out he did. He said he trusted God and he trusted his doctor.

I’ve been thinking about Ray’s testimony. Although I’m not facing anything like what Ray faced, I am afraid more than I sometimes let on. Among my greatest fears is entering that unknown dark place called cancer, along with its medical industrial complex, and not knowing what the outcome will be.

What I’m working on is letting go of certitude and the need for control. I’m trying to trust the Living God. I’m trying to walk into those dark places and trusting – not controlling or being certain – that the Resurrected Christ is there with me, beside me, and with you and working through you, and working through my doctors and nurses. Instead of being so blind by my need to return to control, I’m praying that I’m open to seeing the luminous Christ in the darkness.

Writer Rebecca Solnit quotes a young activist friend of hers who is involved in climate justice. The young man said, “In a chaotic world people need something

to hold onto and something to hold them.” He goes on, “For them, hope is often found in certainty.” ... “Taking power has been the goal at the end of the very straight and narrow road of most political movements of the past. Taking control” ... “Yet we are building movements which believe that to ‘let go’ is the most powerful thing we can do – to let go, walk away from power and find freedom... The need for certainty is subsumed by joy...” (*Hope in the Darkness*, p. 94).

Otis Moss III is the pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. Barack Obama was a member of his church when he ran for President in 2008 and the church received constant death threats from White Supremacy groups and Moss was worried for his family.

In the middle of one night, about three or four in the morning, he heard a noise downstairs. He reached over and got his trusty Louisville Slugger baseball bat and slowly crept downstairs, occasionally hearing more bumps and noises. The noise seemed to be coming from the bedroom of his four-year-old daughter Makayla. He opened the door and there in the dark, his daughter was dancing, practicing her ballet moves. She looked at him and just as naturally as ever said, “Look Daddy, I’m dancing. I’m dancing in the dark,” as she turned and swirled around.

Here was a little girl experiencing the joy of dancing in the darkness.

May the joy and hope of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, empower us to dance in the dark, and even discover the darkness that is luminous, with a newly found light bursting forth.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.