

When Easter Dawns

John 20:1-18

I've been thinking this week about the dawning of Easter, that first dawning of Easter in the garden, and the dawning of Easter in our lives—and about the deepening experience of the Resurrection in us.

The poet Denise Levertov writes:

An awe so quiet

I do not know where it began

A gratitude

had begun

To sing in me

Was there

some moment

dividing

song from no song?

When does dewfall begin?

When does night
fold its arms over our hearts
to cherish them?

When is daybreak? ¹

The famous monk, Thomas Merton writes of the moments just before dawn when, one by one, the birds begin to sing. He calls it the “point vierge”, the virgin point, that “moment of awe and inexpressible innocence” when God opens their eyes and they begin to sing, at first quietly, then moving into “fluent song”.²

I

In John’s gospel Easter begins in the dark before the dawn at dew point, when the birds begin to sing.

Mary Magdalene is at the tomb. She has come to bring spices to anoint Jesus’ body. She noticed, there in the morning mists, that someone had moved the stone away from the tomb. So she runs, *runs*, to Simon Peter and the one

called “the other disciple”, or “The Beloved Disciple”, and says, in a jumble of shock, grief and dismay:

They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.

Now we have a foot race to the tomb between Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple. The Beloved Disciple is never given a name in the gospel. New Testament scholar Sandra Schneiders says that this is so that we might be able to imagine ourselves as that disciple, the Beloved Disciple.

The Beloved Disciple outruns Peter and arrives first at the tomb. Three times in the next four verses we are told and reminded that the Beloved Disciple was faster than Peter. Verse four: “The other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb *first*.” Verse five, “Then Simon Peter came *following* him.” Verse eight: “Then the other disciple who reached the tomb *first*...” Yes, John, we get it! This may be the proof the Beloved Disciple *did* write the gospel!

The Beloved Disciple arrived first and peered into the tomb. He saw the linen burial cloths but did not go in. Why the reticence? Was there a holy awe that held him back? Did he need a moment to breathe? Time to take off his shoes, so to speak, on the suddenly holy ground?

Peter arrived second and barged right on in! He may have said to himself, now out of breath, “I might not have been the first *to* the tomb but I’ll be the first *inside* the tomb!”

Then the Beloved Disciple moved into the tomb, and seeing the linen cloth, the face veil of Jesus, “*believed.*” Faith in John’s gospel is always a verb, *believing*, deeper than a believing this or that, a believing *in*, as in personal relation.

The Beloved Disciple was the first to believe in the Risen Christ. Peter does not yet, nor Mary. We all come to believe in different ways, on our own time-table, or God’s time-table for us.

Then the text says, the Beloved Disciple and Peter returned to their homes.

II

Now Mary is alone in her garden. She had been with Jesus through it all. He had healed her of seven demons. She had become part of the traveling circle of disciples who followed him. She had been one of those who supported him out of her means.

She had followed him on his last trip to Jerusalem. She was there at the cross—when most of the disciples has fled. She was there when he was buried.

And now she had come back in the dark before dawn to anoint his body with spices.

Weeping, she peered into the tomb and saw two angels, but even the sight of the angels could not penetrate her grief, open her eyes to what had happened.

The angels said, “Why are you weeping?” She said, “They’ve taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they laid him.” Another thing had gone terribly, horribly wrong.

Then Jesus appeared to her from just behind her. She must have sensed his presence and turned around. Now Jesus asked, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She still did not recognize him. Supposing him to be the gardener she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Then Jesus called her name. “Mary”, he said; then she recognized who he was. There is something, isn’t there, about the way those who love us call our names? The inflection, the endearments? Then Easter dawned for her, in her. She called out her name for him, “Rabbouni”, she cried, “My dear Master!” The alleluias had begun in her.

She rushed to embrace him, but he held her back. “Do not hold onto me; I have not yet ascended to my Father.” His body was not that of a resuscitated

corpse. It was his resurrection body, what Paul called his “spiritual body”. Jesus was now in a new mode of being.

Then he commissioned her on the spot, to be an apostle, the first apostle of the Resurrection, the first proclaimer of the Easter gospel. “Go, tell my brothers,” he said. And she raced to them and said, “I have seen the Lord!” The early church gave to Mary this esteemed title: “Apostle to the Apostles.” So she has been to us this day.

III

When did Easter begin for you, in you? When did the alleluias begin? When did you first believe it? How are you coming to believe it?

Perhaps the songs came first, then the believing. That’s how it happened for me, with all those thrilling Easter hymns and anthems. Then came the believing, then later the theology.

Christians can get in all sorts of arguments over the nature and meaning of the Resurrection. Some even say, “If you don’t believe it the exact way I believe it, you’re not a Christian”. But when you *sing* Easter, there is little room for *argumentation*. The crucial question about belief is not, “What do I *have* to believe?” Rather, “What do I *need* to believe?”. Our God will supply our need.

A friend of mine has adopted this slogan as a description of his faith these days: “Free of dogma. Full of awe.” This is where Easter leads us.

Easter dawns in different ways, at different times for each of us. And it happens over and over again. Even when we thought the alleluias would not come again.

When did the alleluias begin in you? Sometimes life can almost squeeze them out. But today alleluia is once again God’s gift to you

Just as God has stamped the throat of every bird with its own unique song

--the bob-white, the sparrow, the wren—

so God has stamped our throats with our own unique song

four notes

Al-le-lu-ia

Open your hearts, your throats and let them flow: “Christ is Risen. Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!”

1. Denise Levertov “....That Passeth All Understanding”. *Selected Poems* (N.Y.: A New Directions Book, 2002),p.145

2. Thomas Merton, *Conjecture of a Guilty Bystander* (N.Y.: Doubleday Image,1968),p.131.

