

“While It Was Still Dark”

- I. Introduction: While it was still dark. John tells us that early on the first day of the week, “while it was still dark” Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and was horrified because she believed that Jesus’ body had been stolen. This would have been another insult in a long line of injustices committed against Jesus. So much had happened in the darkness: the agony of waiting in the Garden of Gethsemane; the cruelty and treachery around Jesus’ arrest, interrogation, and condemnation; the desolation of the cross; and now the empty darkness of the tomb. It must have seemed so confusing for the early followers of Jesus to comprehend why the light of the world had been snuffed out by forces of darkness. Yet, there was faithful Mary, grief stricken and terrified, working her way cautiously through the streets to his tomb. Even in her profound despair Mary was living out her love for Jesus and would soon be the first to have a full encounter with him.

- II. Outer darkness mirroring inner darkness. Many Christian writers caution us not to minimize the importance of darkness in our Christian lives, not to try to rush headlong into the Easter light without experiencing what the darkness has to teach us. In her book *When the Heart Waits* (1990) Sue Monk Kidd includes a chapter entitled “Incubating the Darkness.” She writes “When we give ourselves to spiritual journeying, we soon realize that God always invites us beyond where we are. . . . And sometimes that means winding through a dark wood. It doesn’t mean we’re lost, however. The darkness is part of the trip. Too many of us panic in the dark. We don’t understand that it’s a holy dark and that the idea is to surrender to it and journey through to the real light.” (p. 152).

- III. Our darkness. I recently read a brief article in a preaching journal designed to be helpful to those of us who week after week preach God’s word in our churches. This article stressed that what most parishioners want to hear from us is not elaborate and well delivered theological treatises, nor do they want to hear about a sugar-coated faith that’s sweet on the outside but doesn’t have much depth. What they do want to hear is how the preacher lives in faith and hope even during his or her dark times when they are confused and discouraged, and how they find God in the darkness. I sense such questions as I move and work among you. These are fair questions. So briefly I’d like to refer to some of the times of darkness in my own life that were followed by the Easter light. Many of us have similar stories to tell. And before I begin let me empha-

size that during every period or experience of darkness, I have been carried by God, even when I was not aware of it. And I have come into the light when both God and I were ready for the darkness to end.

It was dark to experience at the age of 13 the sudden death of my father who loved me very much, and it was dark to lose my only living sister to cancer in her early thirties, a cancer that could have been treated if it had been discovered earlier. It was dark to stand with my mother as she said good-bye to her daughter, the second of her children to die before her, and it was dark to then lose my mother two years later. It was surprisingly tough at the age of 49 to become an orphan. Out of all that darkness there was also constant resurrection – a church that literally adopted me as a teenager and saw me through that tough time after my father's death; a reconciliation with my sister before her death that was sweet and infused with healing and new life; and the sacred experience of being present with my mother in Allentown, Pennsylvania when as she was dying saw a light in the darkness ahead.

It was a dark time for me and for Peg as relative newlyweds to be told that we could never conceive the children we desired so deeply. This was one of the first times we learned to pray together and wait for God to answer. In spite of our doubts, answer he did, through a specialist at the University of Chicago who began a new treatment and within a short time we were pregnant. That pregnancy ended in a miscarriage, another time of darkness, but was followed by a second pregnancy that brought us our first child Jeremy.

And threaded through my whole young adult and young married life was the darkness of trying to avoid God. Yes, you heard that correctly. After I left home for college I lived much of my life in the darkness and now have no question that God protected me from the dangers surrounding me until I was ready to hear and see him. He never left me; I tried to leave him, but he never left me. Then later, as we joined a community of believers that nurtured us, I remember how close I became to God. I was facing a deep challenge in my life, and through that community, God gave us a group of loyal faithful accepting Christian friends from whom we learned so much about praying with and for one another. God answered prayer after prayer. One Sunday morning in worship I gave that challenge to God. I prayed in earnest and I knew in a deep spiritual way that God heard me and promised to answer. I felt relief and I felt peaceful. Since that time there have been many others times of darkness, but these times have always followed by the light and new life of the Resurrection.

Today is the day of the Resurrection, and Easter's resurrection is always most meaningful and powerful when it stands in contrast to the darkness that has come before. After Jesus' crucifixion he was placed in a dark cave and a stone was rolled across the opening to seal it. Jesus' passion was followed with a time of a solitary lonely darkness. And his resurrection took place in that darkness. Kidd writes, "God in the dark. Traditionally this imagery suggests the ultimate unknowability of God." But she suggests a different meaning, that God enters our darkness. . . . God suffers with us. God weeps with us. God lives our darkness. "This is the recognition that turns our darkness into a shining thing" (p. 69). Yes, because God lives in the darkness with us, God can lead us out of the darkness as well.

The early Christians adopted the butterfly as one of the symbols for the Resurrection. The butterfly in all its beauty was once a common caterpillar. But the caterpillar spins a chrysalis around itself and while in the chrysalis it is transformed into a new and beautiful creature. There is darkness inside the chrysalis, there is struggle inside the chrysalis, but ultimately the transformation is complete, and a butterfly emerges. Our spiritual lives work in this way as well. Each one of us is offered an experience of new birth. Several of our lay speakers on Good Friday described their experiences of being in a deep pit of despair where they profoundly and personally experienced God's love and came to know who Jesus Christ is.

How did the Resurrection happen to Mary and Peter and John? For Mary the darkness lifted when Jesus called her by name; for Peter the darkness left him completely when Jesus came through the locked door into the room where the apostles were hiding. But for John the darkness started to lift when he rushed into the open tomb and saw the folded linen that had been placed over Jesus' face. Although there is debate about it, this folded linen cloth has been said to have had meaning in the Hebrew tradition of the day. When the master of the family was finished eating, he would wipe his fingers and mouth with his napkin, rise, and toss the napkin on the table. But if the master rose from the table, folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant knew that the folded napkin meant, "I'm not finished yet . . . I'm coming back." It has been said that to John this was the meaning of the folded linen cloth.

- IV. Conclusion. Jesus has come back. While it was still dark, Jesus rose from the dead. We do not need to be afraid of the darkness. God is with us in both the darkness and the light. The darkness prepares us for the new light and the new life of Easter morning. Alleluia. Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.