
Infiltrating the Dark

John 20:1-18

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014, by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

Walking among tombs is probably not at the top of your list for Easter day activities with your family. But I am reminded especially this time of year that there are two things we all must face—death and taxes. Mary's not weeping because she owes money to the IRS. She's weeping because it appears that God is dead. Each gospel writer agrees that the resurrection of Jesus took place on the first day of the week. Matthew and Luke say the women go to the tomb at dawn. Mark says they went at sunrise. But John says, "... it was still dark." One writer reminds us that "The darkest hour is just before the dawn..." (James Baldwin). It was still dark. It seems as if we're right where we ended on Friday—in the dark.

I noted a couple of weeks ago how darkness has historically received a bad rap in Christianity as darkness has predominantly been linked to evil. Shady deals by sinister characters in a dark back room behind closed doors. Spooky scenes only at nighttime in horror films like "Nightmare on Elm Street." We seem to only hear ominous sounds in a dark scene of a movie such as "Friday, the 13th." We even talk about the dark side of the Internet—the online drug market, child trafficking, stalking and bullying, in the virtual dark. One person even prays, "When I first found you I was filled with light, now the darkness grows and it is filled with crooked things, bitter and weak, each one bearing my name" (Mary Oliver). Darkness even within.

This suggests that we may be Christian zombies among the tombs in Mary Magdalene's graveyard and find ourselves nursing a dying patient within our soul while we sing that chant from the ecumenical Taizé community in France—"let not my darkness speak to me."

Mary is among the dead, looking for the one who's supposed to be dead, weeping over her loss in the dark. Things aren't always clear in the dark as the disciples see but don't understand or believe.

They're in the dark so it's understandable not to see straightly, think rightly, or hear accurately. But even "while it was still dark," we discover that there is Easter light because Jesus works in the dark. When you may not see or recognize his presence. When you may be totally oblivious to what's happening around you. When you think he's forgotten you or that he's still dead, Jesus is at work in mysterious ways leaving traces of his presence for us to see—like an empty tomb with linen wrappings lying there. It was still dark but Jesus, the light of the world, shines in the darkness. Darkness is not necessarily demonic but a domain where we dare resurrection to happen and resurrection does happen. Jesus' resurrection redeems the darkness and makes it a place of new life and hope. Jesus infiltrates the dark to reclaim darkness as a context for his ministry.

In the dark is actually where we discover a new beginning. When it's dark we may think "lights out!" but it's really "lights on!" John's gospel points back to the beginning to show us that the resurrection is a new beginning. Near the beginning of John, Jesus asks John the Baptist, "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38) and now here, Jesus asks Mary, "Whom are you looking for?" (John 20:15). He points us back to the beginning. To go even further, John's stress on darkness points us to that primordial darkness of Genesis when "the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep" (Genesis 1:2). The darkness was the womb for a new beginning and new creation. Poet James Weldon Johnson puts it this way:

And far as the eye of God could see
Darkness covered everything,
Blacker than a hundred midnights

Down in a cypress swamp.

**Then God smiled,
And the light broke,
And the darkness rolled up on one side,
And the light stood shining on the other,
And God said, "That's good!"**

It's out of the dark that creation occurs because Jesus works in the dark even "in the beginning" which John emphasizes at the beginning of his book. Jesus "was in the beginning with God and all things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1). The resurrected Jesus is a divine sign of the new creation of God in the darkness of a graveyard. This is not an ending; this is a beginning. Just as God spoke the world into existence and said "let there be light" it's not until Jesus calls Mary's name that her light goes on and she sees clearly. He speaks her new world into existence through his revelatory word. For Mary, "Morning has broken, like the first morning, ... springing fresh from the word."

This gospel scene echoes the apostle Paul's declaration that through the death and resurrection of Jesus "there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now don't accuse Paul of ageism! He's saying that the resurrection in the dark is a new creation, a new beginning for us, which means that our past does not hold us captive nor does death have the final word. When Mary identifies Jesus as a gardener, unbeknownst to her, she identifies rightly because "all things came into being through him," life and light, even in the first garden of Genesis. And in this garden among the tombs, there is morning, "born of the one light Eden saw play...God's re-creation of the new day." Even "while it was still dark."

The resurrection is a new creation, a new beginning that has no ending. Jesus works in the dark but he isn't confined to dark places. He transcends the dark too, suggesting that there is more than darkness in God's world. Life doesn't have to only be lived in the dark. Jesus infiltrates the darkness so that the dark doesn't suffocate us and we can recognize his presence even there. But Jesus doesn't remain in the dark because God's creative redemptive purposes go beyond the darkness.

Taking a road trip with your 8 year-old son provides ample time to talk about all kinds of things. Disney Infinity characters. The Miami Heat basketball team. His behavior at school. Sleeping through my sermons. The little girls he thinks are disgusting for hugging him. Life and death. Zachary asked me recently, "Dad, are you going to heaven?" I paused and thought, "I need to get this right." I said, "That's my hope." He responded confidently, "You're going, because you pray, you're the dean, and you do good stuff." I guess there are perks to being the dean! I wish it were that simple but I find comfort in Desmond Tutu's words that "We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low." Underneath the innocent questions and comments of an 8 year old is a desire for resurrection, a yearning for a new creation, a world without end, for life beyond the darkness. At least, there's a curiosity about it. We see this in our culture as well with new shows like ABC's "Resurrection" or new movies like "Heaven is for Real" and books like "Proof of Heaven" by Duke-earned MDs. These cultural products point us beyond the dark, beyond the world, as we know it.

Jesus has already told the criminal on the cross, "Today you will be with me in paradise." He's already told his disciples what we may hear at many funerals, "Do not let your hearts be troubled... In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"(John 14). My son thinks he'll share a bedroom with two of his cousins in heaven and they'll get to play Xbox all day long. That would be paradise for him! Comedian Bill Cosby once told about how his children loved his mother so much that he had to tell his children "that's not the same woman I grew up with...that's an old woman trying to get into

heaven now.” Young and old desire heaven, paradise, because it transcends our current reality and expresses a hope that there is more than darkness, that there is a future.

Whether you subscribe to Dante’s *Paradiso* or the book of Revelation’s image of streets paved with gold, whatever your exact image, Jesus tells Mary, “Don’t hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brother and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” He gestures beyond the darkness through his promise of ascension because he’s not entombed in darkness. His resurrection redeems it and reveals that goodness can happen in the dark. Yet his resurrection also suggests that darkness is not the only reality or realm. He wants to give us more than darkness. The exact nature of what Jesus says may be unclear but it is clear that it involves a reunion of Father and Son in the Holy Spirit.

The resurrection points us to a future communion with the triune God and one another. The resurrection is not just a new creation in the present darkness; it is the creation of a future beyond the darkness, beyond what we experience now. If Christ had not been raised, I’d be out of a job and calling and we would have no future. Our future is in the risen Christ, not in a grave. His resurrection is the first fruit of our future, a promise that our future lies with him, who is our eternal home and hope.

A promise that the resurrected Jesus has a future for us, a fellowship divine with the eternal “love divine.” Jesus infiltrates the dark to ensure that we join the eternal family of God and can say together “*Our Father*.” It’s a grand reunion, a great camp meeting in the promised land, in the garden of God, a restoration of the goodness of Eden. Such goodness that we hear, “behold, I make all things new.” A new heaven and a new earth where God will see again that “it was good.” A goodness that transcends the darkness such that “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev 21). Just a good, beautiful, true communion, a divine dance of love with our delightful God. Jesus infiltrates the dark that we may truly dance again. Don’t you want to dance?

A new creation. A new beginning. A new future. The resurrection promises it. This is why we cannot hold on to him because he wants to give us the future God has for us and he can’t do it if we hold on to the past. The resurrection moves us beyond the past toward God’s future.

It may still be dark but the open grave is the hope of our future because it says that the future is not closed, but open for those who face it with hope in the risen Lord. The future is God’s and it is good, so good that I can’t help but sing:

Finish, then, Thy new creation;
Pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see Thy great salvation
Perfectly restored in Thee;
Changed from glory into glory,
Till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before Thee,
Lost in wonder, love, and praise.