

LEARNING TO WALK IN THE DARK

It Was Still Dark

John 20:1-18

April 20, 2025

Every year, I remember. Easter began in the dark. My father would quietly tap on my bedroom door. *Pssst...Chris...do you still want to go?* It felt like I had just closed my eyes. How could it already be time to get up? But Easter began when my bare feet hit the cold wooden floor. We rode to the church together in silence, just us two; there's not much to say at that hour in the morning. We parked in the empty lot of Vandalia Presbyterian Church and made our way to the lawn, where we silently set up metal folding chairs. Every year I remember Easter began for me in the darkness and the quiet of that empty lawn, as slowly, human-shaped shadows began to whisper in the pre-dawn twilight.

Still dark.

Early on a Sunday, a woman walks to the graveyard. Of all the gospels, John is most specific about the time Mary arrived. It was still dark. The sun had not yet risen. It was still dark as Mary approached the final resting place of her dearest friend. The darkness was more than light's absence. Mary was veiled in grief, surrounded by the shadows of loss, the gloom of faded hope. The humble teacher, the gentle healer, the powerful preacher who had given her reason to believe, was gone. His bright light extinguished on a Roman cross. There was nothing for her to do but put one foot in front of the other. And so, I imagine, unable to sleep, she rose in the darkness to stand outside the tomb, and there she wept for all that was lost.

Still dark.

Now, we who worship on this bright Easter morning know what happened next because John gives us all we need. He tells us it's the first day of the week—that's the day of resurrection. Life has already begun to stir before the sun rises. But Mary cannot see it yet. Not in the dark. It's Easter,

but she's still living in Good Friday. And I think we know exactly what that feels like.

We know Good Friday. Yes, we have seen death's power. We have felt suffering's weight. Oh yes, we know that graveyard. We too have been awake in the dark. Maybe you are searching medical websites for answers you don't want to find, or replaying in your mind an angry outburst you wish you could take back, or aching from the absence of one you love who used to be right there. It's 3 o'clock in the morning, and you're doomscrolling through cruelty close to home and catastrophe across the globe. It's 3 in the morning, and you're worrying over aging parents. It's 3 in the morning, and you're fretting over distant children or frayed relationships. It's 3 in the morning, and in those silent hours, fear swells and burdens grow heavy.

Still dark.

So, we try. We aim to keep the darkness at bay. We fill our homes with artificial light and noise-making devices. I remember when our son Samuel was two years old, every single night, when we flipped the switch to turn out the light in his room, he would say, "Uh-oh." Yes, darkness is hard at any age. Last month I had my annual physical. After looking me over, the doctor had a few questions. I had answers. Stress at work? *Not one bit.* How are you sleeping? *Nine hours a night, doc.* How about you? Our laughter was knowing, because the story is familiar. Most days still begin in the dark—not what the doctor ordered.

And yet. The gospel witness is crystal clear on this one point: darkness is the only place where Easter begins. Only in the dark can you see that first glimmer of light. New life stirs in unlit places—seeds in the ground, babies in the womb, Jesus in the tomb. This day is not about our

ability to magically see in the dark. All we need to do is show up and let God turn on the light.

You might have noticed that John tells his story in two different parts. Part one is frantic and frenzied. Mary discovers the stone rolled away, and she runs to tell Peter and John. The men—of course the men—race each other to the tomb, see that it's empty, and go back home. In the first scene, there's a lot of action, but no understanding. No one mentions the resurrection. They're focused on the body. Where is it? But Mary, weeping in grief and exhaustion, goes back to the tomb. Even then, even there, the sight of two brightly lit angels cannot lift the fog. "They have taken away my Lord," she says, "and I don't know where they put him."

Still dark. And then, the miracle.

Jesus is there. Alive. And she thinks he's the gardener. I just love that. Why? Because he is not radiant with resurrection light. There is no glowing halo around his head. No choirs of angels surround him with songs of praise. Frederick Buechner tells it best: "When the...gospels come to the most important part of the story, they tell it in whispers."ⁱ

I think Jesus whispered her name. "Pssst...Mary." And suddenly, she knows. She just knows. I think that's when Easter dawns. I think that's when the light shines. The impossible has happened, and now anything is possible.

Mary has missed every other sign—the rolled-away stone, the empty tomb, the angels, even Jesus himself. And who can blame her? After all, it's still dark. Hard to see. But when she hears her name, that's when everything changes.

Friends, the message of resurrection does not always come in earth-shaking thunder, or neon lights, or shouts from a mountaintop. It comes in a word spoken in love. *Mary.*

Samuel, it's alright. We'll be right here. You're safe. We love you.

And isn't that what we all want? To hear our name spoken in love? Isn't that what we all need? Isn't that what gives

us courage in the darkness? Knowing we're not alone? Knowing we are loved beyond measure?

If you have heard your name spoken in love, then you know what happened to Mary in that garden. That's when the light broke through. That's when her faith returned, her life was changed, and she became the first preacher of the gospel: "I have seen the Lord." Five words. The original Easter sermon. I imagine some of you dream I could be so succinct.

But first, she heard her name.

So, what about you? Have you heard your name? Have you seen the Lord? Because if you have, God's got work for you to do. The truth of Easter does not depend on our ability to explain what happened. This day is not about convincing arguments. It's about encounter. It's about testimony. *I have seen the Lord. He spoke my name.*

You see, it's still dark.

Too many still live in Good Friday's deadly grip. Too many. Too many are left out, kept out, worn out, shut out, shoved out. Too many live in the shadows of violence, injustice, and cruelty. And too many enable these conditions through *our* silence and our timidity. Easter insists on a different story. This is no sentimental promise. It is the relentless proclamation that death dealers will not have the final say. That love—yes, love—is stronger than death, not only in our hearts, but in our streets, in our city, in our nation, and in the world. I must proclaim to you that the resurrection demands a new way of life that refuses to accept abuse, or bigotry, or exploitation. That resurrection demands a new way of life that listens for the names of the suffering and sees their faces. That resurrection demands a new way of life that carries light that reveals, light that exposes, light that drives out the shrouded forces of hatred. And let us begin.

Because if you have seen the Lord, you can no longer hide your light. If you have seen the Lord, you cannot hold your tongue.

Easter is encounter. And encounter changes everything. Because of Easter, love can no longer be an abstraction. It has a name, a face, a story. Because of Easter, we know that

is how we are loved, not in general, but by name. Easter is encounter, and encounter changes everything.

So today, my friends, we proclaim the defeat of death. The grave has lost its victory. Today we announce God's triumph over all that seeks to separate us from God. And maybe you are ready to meet the Risen Christ. Maybe you are ready to join the celebration.

But maybe not. Maybe this day still feels heavy. Maybe new life has not yet whispered your name. *Afterall, it is still dark.* And I tell you, it may get darker still.

If that's where you are, I have good news: you are in the very place where new life begins. Easter only always begins in the dark. And you've already done the one thing you have to do, the only thing you can do—you showed up. No doubt you've brought your questions, your grief, your fear, and, I pray, a flicker of hope whispered in the darkness.

A couple of weeks ago for spring break, our family traveled to Zion National Park in Utah, a place of astounding beauty and light that echoes. One of Zion's marvels is this mile-long tunnel through Mt. Carmel, an engineering masterpiece in 1930. The first time we drove through that tunnel, I was at the wheel, and our eight-year-old son, Ben, was in the backseat. As we emerged from darkness into full sun, Ben was reflective:

Hey, Dad, look how bright it is when you come out of a dark cave. I have to blink a lot and squint my eyes, but I love it.

That's Easter. It begins in the dark. And so, you are where you are meant to be. Now, listen for the voice of love.

It sounds like a quiet tap on a closed door. It looks like the first rays of light on a church lawn, or brightness that makes you squint to see. Hope is dawning.

Psst...Mary! Time to wake up. The sun is rising.

¹ Fredrick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, p. 252.