

While It Was Still Dark

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I Corinthians 15:12-28

John 20:1-29

“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.”

As the first day of the week was dawning, writes Matthew. *Very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen*, says Mark. *On the first day of the week, at early dawn*, reads Luke. But according to John, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. “... ‘darkness’ is appropriate for John,” notes Raymond Brown, the late, great Johannine scholar, “for all that the empty tomb means to Mary is that the body had been stolen”; that her dead friend’s remains were missing; that death was the final fact she could know about her life and his, your life and mine.

Though I think darkness is appropriate for John in another sense. *In him was life, and the life was the light of the world* wrote John at the beginning. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* John’s gospel is riddled with characters who must decide with their lives between the light and the darkness. The majority invariably walk in darkness, stumble in darkness, dwell in darkness, choosing the settled claims of religion and culture rather than being claimed by revelation, by the life of him who is the light of the world. Put another way on this morning, while it is still dark, John is saying to us, who have become unwitting characters in his story by virtue of our walking into a church on Easter morning, he is saying that we are in the dark about the meaning of our lives lived in the face of death so long as we believe he is dead and not alive.

Return with me, then, to Mary who, at this point in the story, has nothing more than an empty tomb to go on. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,” she says to the disciples, “and we do not know where they have laid him.” Two thousand years later, with nothing more than an empty tomb to go on, how are we to decide between the darkness we know and the unfathomable light that is his resurrection? At least Mary was there; but we are here. The tomb may have been empty then; but this is now. How can it be, between there and here, between then and now, that we should come to believe he is alive? Though if we take our cues from John’s characters, being alive and present at his birth, his ministry, his arrest and crucifixion or even being around after his rising did not make the choice between the darkness and the light any easier. Then and there (no less than here and now), the question was not a question of what to do with the facts that were before them: it was a question of whether to trust their lives into the keeping of the God who, in Jesus Christ, had come to them. But we are getting ahead of ourselves, for on the first day of the week, while it is still dark, we with Mary think it is with an empty tomb that we have to do.

Standing outside the tomb, what keeps us choosing the darkness, here and now (or at least what we allow to keep us hiding in the darkness) is the problematic character of history in relation to the necessary truths of reason. That is to say, how can we go from a narrative that states as a fact in time that the tomb was empty to a belief that God raised Jesus from the dead? This was the question of an 18th century critic and essayist named Gotthold Ephraim Lessing who wrote, rather famously, of what he

called “the ugly broad ditch” between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason. He writes,

If on historical grounds I have no objection to the statement that Christ raised to life a dead man; must I therefore accept as true that God has a Son who is of the same essence as himself? To jump with that historical truth to a quite different class of truths and to demand of me that I should form all my metaphysical and moral ideas accordingly, this is the ugly broad ditch that I could not get across, however often and however earnestly I...tried to make the leap.

Some have attempted to make the leap by asking the text to give up its truth metaphorically. We say the resurrection is true as a metaphor is true. If you were to ask New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan what happened on Easter Sunday, he would say that the story “reflects the struggle of Jesus’ followers to make sense both of his death and of their continuing experience of empowerment by him.” In other words, resurrection is a metaphor for the feeling of aliveness in us.

Such a reading of religious texts has recently gained prominence on the stage in a raucous and remarkable play that rightly spoofs the truth claims of Mormonism. Depending on your tolerance for a particular four letter word, I recommend you see what I take to be a sympathetic critique of all religions. The play’s bottom line is that the unreasonable claims of faith can be useful if they are understood metaphorically. The Book of Mormon is an especially easy target, according to Andrew Sullivan, because its claims were so recently concocted. Armed with the story of Joseph Smith and the golden plates buried somewhere in New York, the most unlikely of Mormon missionaries finally must face the fact that this story is not helpful to Ugandans dying of AIDS and living under the murderous threats of a warlord. At a loss, he begins to make up a story that turns out to be a more helpful lie than the text he could not himself believe, saying by way of apology to the villagers, “It’s a metaphor!” I found myself wondering how absurd the virgin birth or the resurrection must sound to random passers-by of a Sunday morning. To tell you the truth, a metaphor once was as close as I could come to the truth of the resurrection, which is to say on the first day of the week, the darkness lingered as I stood outside the tomb with not much more than an inkling of belief in the living Lord and the faith of Shakespeare’s Prospero:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leaves not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

There are also those who would eliminate the ugly broad ditch by holding Scripture to be historically inerrant. This is the darkness of religious literalism in the guise of light, of rigid belief in the garb of rigorous theology, a darkness strangely condoned this week by David Brooks in his own critique of *The Book of Mormon*. He lauds what he calls the dry and schematic map of reality drawn by religion, not because it is true but because it works to build character, conserve values, control passions. “The religions that thrive,” Brooks writes, “have exactly what [the play] ridicules:

communal theologies, doctrines and codes of conduct rooted in claims of absolute truth.” Such were the characters who preferred the dark certainties of religion in John’s gospel. Such are the characters currently in an uproar over a fallen darling of fundamentalism named Rob Bell who has questioned the absolute truth of exclusive salvation and eternal damnation. Without hell, counter his critics, why be good? Believing more in the inerrancy of the text than in the living Lord to whom it points, they post themselves outside the empty tomb lest someone as unorthodox as Jesus presumes to knock on heaven’s door.

Notice the pride that is part and parcel of choosing the darkness, be it the darkness embraced by the atheist, the liberal or the fundamentalist. Each stands outside the empty tomb in some degree of certainty. John instead tells us that Mary stands outside the tomb weeping. I take John to mean that the darkness of human existence without the life of him who is the light of the world is unbearable for those who were made to live in relation to him and think they cannot.

There is small comfort in John’s report that even the angels sitting where Jesus’ body had been lying did not cause Mary to think him alive. When they ask why she is weeping, she simply states the facts: *They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.* Nor does the next question, put to her by a stranger she supposed to be the gardener, cause her to doubt what she believes to be the case. *Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*

Mary he says. *Rabbouni!* she said, not with certainty but with astonishment. In this brief moment when he who was dead calls her name, surprising her because he is alive, we behold the “the One who once was enclosed within the limits of the time between his birth and his death...[as] the Lord of all time, [as] eternal...and therefore present in [every] time.” What takes place on the third day and so on this day is “not something that that belongs to the past, which can be present only by recollection..., but is a present event, the event which fills and determines [every present moment].” His history, from Bethlehem to the Jordon to Golgotha, is revealed in his resurrection to be the history of God with us and with all people of all times, taking place here and now as it did there and then. He lives!

This would be a fantastic and not very helpful statement [says Barth) if it simply meant that He is something like this for certain men [and women] of his own age, and that He can be something of the same for [us] by our recollection of Him...by a sympathetic experience of His person.... He would then be alive only by virtue of the life breathed into Him as a historical and therefore a dead figure by the men [and women] of earlier ages.

But he reveals himself to be eternally present in the moment he calls Mary by name such that, eternally present in his call to the twelve to follow him, he is calling you; in his speaking with Nicodemus by night and the woman at the well at midday, he is speaking with you; in his healing of the man at the pool of Bethzada, he is asking you if you want to be made well; in his feeding of the five thousand, his calming of the sea, his forgiveness of the woman caught in adultery, his giving sight to the man born blind, his raising of Lazarus, he invites you to glimpse the room made for you by God in His life eternally.

I repeat: the question of Easter morning is not a question of what to do with the historical facts that before Easter morning we could say were inaccessibly distant to our ways of knowing the truth: it is a question of whether to trust our lives into the keeping of the God who, in Jesus Christ, comes to us in every moment of this mortal life because he is alive. Lessing’s ugly broad ditch is only relevant if in it we hide

ourselves, as we did in the first garden, from his living presence; if because of it we close our eyes in order to take ourselves and our 'honesty' with such frightful seriousness; if it causes us to safeguard ourselves against the truth of death's defeat and the promise of love's triumph with which he confronts us and changes us in the twinkling of an eye.

And even though you should choose to hide or close your eyes or safeguard yourself against the life that is the light of the world, the gospel is this: God in Christ presently is leaping over the ugly broad ditch you cannot cross, however seriously you have attempted to leap, to the end that, on the first day of the week, the light having finally dawned, with the saints throughout the ages, we may shout down the long corridors of history: "He is risen! He is risen indeed!"