

... and the darkness did not overcome it

Acts 10:34–43

Psalm 118:1–2, 14–24

1 Corinthians 15:19–26

Luke 24:1–12

Text: Luke 24:1, John 1:5

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Introduction

Early dawn is when the sunlight is reflected by the atmosphere sufficient, on a clear day, to distinguish the sky from the land. Darkness is lifting. Shapes of objects slowly emerge in clarity. There is something comforting about seeing the dawn, particularly after a long night of struggle in the midst of some turmoil in our lives. The night that made the turmoil seem worse is now receding and there is a sense of relief that a new day has come. Dawn is often used as a metaphor for hope. But this dawn was a dawn like no other.

The late (d. Nov 7, 2016) Leonard Cohen celebrated his 82nd birthday (Sept 21, 2016) announcing his upcoming LP, *You Want It Darker*; the mesmerizing title track, according to a press release, “delves into an unflinching exploration of the religious mind.” Cohen’s lyrics are haunting:

Magnified, sanctified
Be thy holy name
Vilified, crucified
In the human frame
A million candles burning
For the love that never came
You want it darker
We kill the flame

We kill the flame. I had taken this last line for the title of my Good Friday sermon. Jesus, the one who claimed to be the light of the world, was snuffed out by the crush of sinful humanity. Our sin. Death and its minions—the devil, evil, sickness—claimed a great victory. Darkness always wants it darker. Jesus who was victorious in his ministry over sickness and evil and even death in those whose

life returned to them at his behest; Jesus who seemed so indestructible ended on a cruel cross helpless as evil unleashed its worst. The Apostle Paul is right that death is an enemy and this enemy thinks itself victorious on Good Friday.

Who are these women on their way to the tomb this early dawn? In Luke's gospel these women were the ones who financially supported Jesus' ministry. (Luke 8:1-3) These were devoted disciples who loved Jesus. They were the devoted ones who endured the entire spectacle of Jesus' crucifixion in all its horrors. (Luke 23:49) They stayed to the end going to the tomb and witnessing the deposition of the corpse therein. (Luke 23:55) I doubt that this early dawn was much of a metaphor of hope for them. They brought spices to finish the burial rituals for embalming the body of Jesus; spices that express care for the body of a loved one who has died. They are hardly skipping their way to the tomb. This is a slow sad walk of duty, born of love, of course.

My supposition is that you likely were hoping for a happier beginning to a sermon for Easter. I am inviting you to try to experience this early dawn, a dawn like no other. We Christians are eager to rush past this early part of the story to the happy events that occur later on this resurrection day. Please stay with the dawn; please stay with the disciples as this day is beginning. Instead, touch their sadness and dismay and despair. Unless we go to Good Friday we will never fully appreciate the wonder of what is discovered this dawn; unless we walk with these women the magnitude of the Apostle John's sentence will be muted: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

1. The first hint that 'the darkness did not overcome' the light that is Jesus Christ is the fact that these women found the stone rolled away from the tomb. We humans keep our graves closed for many obvious reasons. Other gospel writers tell us that these women had worried about their ability to move the stone so they could finish embalming. But when they got there the stone was already off the tomb. The tomb was open.

As already noted, we humans keep our tombs closed. Dead is dead, after all. We live today in a world that is dominated by various forms of very old philosophy named Epicureanism. It is a system of philosophy founded around 307 BC based upon the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus. For Epicurus, dead was dead. There was nothing higher than ourselves to appeal to. The only thing we have to deal with is found in our living. He taught that pleasure or happiness is the chief good. In popular parlance, Epicureanism thus means devotion to pleasure, comfort, and high living, with a certain nicety of style.

There are various forms of this idea at work in our world today. As many atheist philosophers have stated, they believe that in the universe there is only a blind pitiless indifference; some win, some lose; there is nothing (or no one) to contradict. As Richard Dawkins succinctly put it with respect to human life: “DNA neither knows nor cares. DNA just is. And we dance to its music.”

In his 2021 [article](#) *Death and Forgiveness*, a man named Joseph Keegin described how this understanding about life worked out for him. “I had always been suspicious of Christianity as being somehow too good to be true, that it papered over the real ugliness of the world with a happy message about hope and love. As far as I could tell, we are alone in a universe that is slowly dying of its own accord, and all we can do in the meantime is stitch together beautiful stories of various kinds to build a shelter for ourselves from the cold indifference of the cosmos—but the indifference of the cosmos is what is real, not the stories we tell. Religion, I believed, is cowardice, retreat; courage demands facing the facts, owning up to the meaninglessness of things.”

For these women on the way to the tomb, death is dead. They are on their way to embalm the corpse; darkness has overcome the light. But now, in the dim light of early dawn, the first hint that their understanding of things is about to be turned upside down is the discovery that the tomb is open. The first observation that darkness may not have overcome the light is the stone rolled away from the tomb. The first hint that our conviction that death is dead may not be as solid as we think is the open grave. Can we suspend our conviction that death is dead long enough to entertain this open tomb before we rush to roll the stone back over it?

2. On this dawn as the light emerges and things that look shadowy begin to reveal their shape, a second hint shatters their world. When they went into the tomb, we are told, “they did not find the body.” A second hint pointing towards the truth that the darkness has not overcome the light; the body of Jesus is not there. Now that fact in and of itself does not prove anything but it does demand some sort of explanation. We are told the women were perplexed. That would be an understatement. We know from John’s gospel they conclude someone stole or moved the body for a reason they cannot imagine.

At the risk of being grotesque, I invite you to try to step into the tomb with them. It is my habit to go occasionally and visit the grave of my late wife Valerie. Now if I drove into the cemetery one day and discovered her grave opened and its contents gone, ‘perplexed’ would not come anywhere close to expressing what I

would be feeling. Despair, violated, beside myself, would be better depictions. This is more in keeping with what is happening to these women. We Christians tend to rush ahead to the rest of the story and thus sanitize this moment; folks, they are in a grave yard looking for a corpse. They don't know yet that they are looking for the living among the dead.

The body isn't there. The gospel asserts that the reason they can't find the body is that Jesus has been raised from the dead. This has happened only once in history. It is a one-of-a-kind event—to be sure, it is promised in the gospel that it will happen again to anyone who clings to Jesus in faith; or as we read from the Apostle Paul, “so all will be made alive in Christ.” But I get ahead of myself. On this Easter dawn with the women in the tomb, we don't know that yet. They just know that the body is gone and their world has been shattered. Their expectations are rattled. It demands explanation. Where is the body? What happened?

Then as now all manner of explanations are offered to explain what happened. Matthew tells us that some officials spread the story that the disciples stole the body. Today people say that this is a mythical story the disciples told to keep Jesus' memory alive because he was a really good guy after all. The story the gospels tell of this Easter morning is remarkably un-sanitized. If you were making up a story of heroes you certainly would not have Peter remaining in a state of unbelief after he confirmed what the women told him. (And in that day the witness of women was considered unreliable, so having women as the first witnesses would not make for a compelling story). Indeed, the response of the people in the story is pretty much what you would expect if what they say happened really did happen.

So what are we going to do with this second hint, the body isn't there. It demands explanation. And by the way, ignoring it or indifference to it are explanations people give. The gospel says the reason you can't find the body is because Jesus is not here, but has risen. The Apostles tell us that Jesus' resurrection from the dead is the vindication that in the death of Jesus it was, in fact, death that was defeated. His resurrection is vindication that in the cross sin and wrong have been dealt with—my sin and my wrong—as God has absorbed the just penalty for our sin in himself. The gospel asserts that Jesus, the light of all people, shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

3. A third hint—and it is more than a hint—that this early dawn is a dawn like no other comes from the lips of the two men in dazzling clothes who suddenly appear with the women in the tomb. “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He

is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

The implication is that we need to be taught the meaning of this event. We are called to heed Jesus if we are going to apprehend what is happening. The open tomb and missing body do not prove anything. The message to these women was to heed Jesus whose teaching they knew. It was in remembering Jesus’ words that caused them to return from the tomb as the first witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. And that is what the church has been gathering to do ever since, to listen to Jesus. Jesus said to his disciples, whoever listens to you listens to me.

Preaching isn’t articulating notions whose inherent superiority is self-evident. Preaching, rather, is testifying to the living person of Jesus Christ as he is clothed with his truth. In the course of this testimony the living one himself emerges from the sincere but garbled utterance of the preacher and stands forth as living person to be seized and trusted and loved and obeyed. Preaching is a matter of uttering many words about Jesus when, in the midst of these many words, the Word himself steps forth in such a way that hearers are no longer assessing words; hearers are confronted with that Person whom they cannot evade and concerning whom they must now decide. But of course the one spoken about can loom up out of the many words about him and stand forth as the world’s sole redeemer and sovereign and hope only if he is alive. Unless Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead and is now alive, preaching is nothing more than an exercise in comparing idea with idea, notion with notion, even bias with bias.

I have endeavoured today to walk with the disciples in the early dawn as the hints that something momentous has occurred are being experienced. Something so momentous that the world—in fact the entire universe—will never be the same afterwards. The events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is truth upon which history, including yours and mine, finds its meaning and salvation. I asked you not to rush ahead to the rest of the story so that we might, in some measure, sense how everything gets turned upside down this day. Over the next few weeks—in the church season of Easter—we will read, Sunday by Sunday, the rest of the story; the stories of Jesus’ resurrection appearances.

As the angelic messengers said, we need to hear and heed what Jesus taught us on this matter. For many of you, you can hardly wait to again reflect in these wonderful stories. It may be that you are new to this story or revisiting it again after some time away from it—I invite you to join us week by week this Easter

season and probe the rest of the story. Jesus who is alive this Easter early dawn is alive and calling us to himself today.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.