

April 1, 2018 Easter

Isaiah 25:6-9, Acts 10:34-43

Rev. Jen Nagel, University Lutheran Church of Hope

John 20:1-18

Barbara Brown Taylor, Learning to Wait in the Dark: A Holy Saturday Reflection, Huffington Post, 4-18-14. Heschel quote commonly found online, including in Lewis' article. Karoline Lewis in Working Preacher, "No End to the Story", 3-26.18 (final quote is Lewis'). Wendell Berry, Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.... Christ is Risen, Indeed. Alleluia!

Grace and peace to you, God's Beloved, through our Risen Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb."

Matthew and Mark and Luke all tell the story beginning at dawn, but this Easter morning we hear John's account of the resurrection, and he begins a little differently, a little earlier.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb."

I wonder why she came so early, while it was still dark.

I wonder if she couldn't sleep and had had it with trying.

I wonder if she'd celebrated the Passover, or if maybe she'd idled away the Sabbath hours crying and frightened and confused.

I wonder if it was risky for her to be out by herself after all the events of the last days.

I wonder if she just didn't care anymore and couldn't stop herself from going.

So, in the wee hours of the morning, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

Tombs in that time, in that region, were like small caves, holes in the rock, low to the ground, with an opening covered by a stone.

Inside were shallow shelves, something like bunks, where the body rested until the flesh decomposed and the bones could be collected for safe-keeping.

As John tells it, Jesus' friends had worked hard to find a suitable tomb and to prepare his body *before* the Passover began on Friday evening.

Remember, Nicodemus? He showed up again on Friday, lugging a hundred pounds of burial spices.

Then, it was Saturday, the Sabbath, the day of rest, and Passover, too.

Finally, finally, Mary **came to the tomb while it was still dark**.

Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in the Huffington Post,

*"Whatever happened to **Jesus** between Saturday and Sunday,*

it happened in the dark, with the smell of damp-stone and dug-earth in the air.

*It happened where no one but him could talk about it later,
and he did not talk about it—at least not so anyone could explain it to anyone else.” PAUSE*

Dear friends in Christ, this morning as our Alleluias ring out, I invite you into the dark hours when
Mary ventured to the tomb—amazed and disturbed, all at once.

In the dark, at the tomb: I’m convinced this is where resurrection begins for most of us.

In the dark, we sleep on decisions and pray to wake with fresh wisdom.

In the dark earth, seeds emerge.

In the dark, healing happens, our bodies are quietly knit back together.

In the dark, we slowly sense that we can go on even as we face tremendous loss or change.

In the dark, reaching out, however tenuous, we grasp a hand, we name the pain, we begin to heal.

Whether literal dark, or that dark night of our soul, this is where resurrection begins.

A few of you may have been in Washington DC last Saturday at the March for Our Lives,

the rally against gun violence organized by

the students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

Plenty more of you were in St. Paul.

I’ve been watching the reports and reading, along with you.

Senior Emma Gonzalez, one of the student organizers and strong voices in this movement,

had her cell phone timer running during her speech:

Six minutes and 20 seconds, that’s how long the shooting lasted.

In a beautiful, deeply moving, relational way, she named all of those who died, beginning:

“Six minutes and 20 seconds...and my friend Carmen would never complain to me about piano practice.”

And she continued, naming all the rest in this same relational way.

Then Emma Gonzalez stood, still, silent, completely still,

tears on her checks,

eyes fixed in the distance across the heads of those hundreds of thousands of young people.

She stood in silence.

The crowd stood in silence, tear streaked faces, some holding hands, eyes shaded in the midday light,

occasional chants a little uncomfortable and then more silence.

It’s hard, very hard, to stand in silence, and in grief, and in resistance, **at the tomb, in the dark,**

but Emma Gonzalez did,

until six minutes and 20 seconds had finally passed.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

I believe that's what Emma Gonzalez did in her speech,

in what she said and in what she didn't say,

in her silence, in her tears—she went to the tomb, she took us in the dark to the tomb.

Resurrection, dear friends, begins in the dark at the tomb.

Mary knew that, as much as any of us know anything in our pain: resurrection begins in the dark.

Emma Gonzalez knows that: resurrection begins in the dark at the tomb.

That's where we begin.

That's where we begin, but.... resurrection isn't the end of the story.

Oh, I know, Jesus dies, Jesus is raised, what more can we say?

But as Karoline Lewis writes, resurrection isn't the end of Jesus' story, it isn't the end of God's story.

It isn't the end of our story: resurrection is just the beginning.

Jesus recognizes Mary, sees her, knows her, loves her: Mary, he says, Beloved Mary.

Like we are recognized, like we are known and like we are loved by our Savior.

And then Jesus goes on, ahead of them, ahead of us, saying, I'm going to my God and to your God,

weaving us into relationship, into new trust, into deeper community, into beloved community,

sometimes in surprising, unexpected, even uncomfortable ways.

When the world sees death, despair, impossibility, we are called again in the dark to the tomb.

To practice in that space of pain this Easter day, but, really, everyday, tomorrow, and the next, and the one after that, to practice, as Wendell Barry writes, "to practice resurrection".

That's how we'll be witnesses, dear ones, as we **practice resurrection**.

In 1965, Rabbi Abraham Heschel marched with Dr. King between Selma, Alabama and Montgomery.

Rabbi Heschel wrote, "I felt my legs were praying."

Oh, this resurrection, this new life, it is embodied,

and our prayers, our justice-making, our Jesus-love must be so embodied,

in our hands and our feet, in our legs,

in our own blessed and broken bodies, brown and black and peachy pink.

For as Rev. King and Rabbi Heschel knew so well, it is not done yet.

If our calling is anything, it is to be a witness,

to dare to name both the places of death and the places of resurrection in our lives,

in the lives of those around us,
to point out God still at work in our midst.

Where death and fear and isolation could have the last word, at the tomb, in the dark,

resurrection love triumphs.

That may seem crazy. That may seem impossible.

Our role is to simply witness to what we experience.

Communities being reborn.

Forgiveness finding flesh.

Truth, hard truth, uttered and heard.

The honest complexity of life honored and held at the tomb, in the dark—trusting that there the Risen

Jesus meets us, again, not just on Easter morning with all this fun and fancy music,

but tomorrow, and the day that follows, too.

My role—our role—is simply to witness resurrection.

Resurrection, dear friends, begins in the dark at the tomb

but that isn't "the end of the story, it's just the beginning." Amen.