

Easter Vigil Sermon, April 16, 2022

After a sleepless night Thursday, when their world was shattered in chaos, and the horrific events of Friday, when their Lord was crucified, and a day spent skulking in the upper room, trying to get a little information, wondering if the soldiers would come for them next, the disciples are sleeping from sheer exhaustion, or perhaps tossing and turning in their beds. They did not know it, but the next day their world would change again, in ways they could never have imagined.

On that very night, this very night, the Spirit of God reached into the dark tomb where Jesus' lifeless body lay. As the dawn steals so softly into the dark sky, the warmth steals into Jesus' cold body as the life grows again within him. Slowly, slowly, his heart begins to beat again and his life returns. He stirs and sits up. He feels the new life within him and a sense of well-being and joy rising in him like a fountain. An angel rolls the stone away and Jesus goes forth into the pre-dawn light and walks a while in the garden, feeling again the dew on his feet, hearing the stirring of birds with their first tentative song greeting the day.

I have often found that it is in the darkest times, the times when I am in despair and confusion, when I feel like I'm drowning in grief, that Jesus comes to me. Now, I've never actually had the risen Lord in person walk up to me. And if I had, I would probably have been like Mary Magdalene, who didn't recognise him and thought he was someone else, a gardener maybe. But Jesus is not ashamed to act through other people or through his other creatures either.

Have you ever experienced this? Some small thing, when you are at your rope's end and you think there is nothing left. Life is just uniformly awful and there is no hope. You are in the pit of despair and life looks very dark and dreary and you have no hope left. And that is when Jesus comes to us. Maybe in some beauty of nature, or in the presence of a friend, even a dog with a wagging tail licking our hand. A light touch to our cold selves. A word spoken in the darkness. A tiny spark of life. And we take a deep breath and warmth begins to steal into our cold and shivering hearts.

After my brother died, a few months later, I was back at college and I had begun to realise that this was not just a nightmare I would wake up from, but the way things were. My brother was dead, and I would not wake up and find him alive. And life seemed very dark and dreary, and I was depressed and sad and had begun to feel there was no point in living. One Friday evening I went for a walk in the dark and I found myself wishing a truck would run over me. Mind you, I was walking on a trail around the college lake and it was highly unlikely that any trucks would be there, but I didn't stop to think about that.

I thought I should call my best friend, Stephen, one of my classmates. I lived in the dorms, but Stephen lived with his wife about an hour's drive away. But I knew in my heart that if I called him, he would come and get me and take me to their house for the weekend. And perversely, although I wanted that, I also didn't want it. I kind of wanted to stay in this dark pool of despair and keep feeling like there was no hope, no love, no reason to live. Or perhaps I was afraid that it would be disloyal to my brother to ever enjoy life again when he was dead.

I waited till 10:30 at night to call Stephen, thinking it would then be too late for him to come an hour to get me and an hour back, and I would be proved right that no one cared. I told him how I was feeling, that I was wishing I was dead. He stopped me and said, "I'm coming out to get you for the weekend. Pack a bag and don't do anything stupid till I get there." I tried to argue but he said, "I'm on my way," and hung up.

I spent the weekend with Stephen and Paula. I don't think we did anything very special. Just hung out and maybe did our homework together. But that was the turning point for me. That was God's finger reaching into my dark tomb and touching me, restoring me to life. After that I slowly climbed out of the pit of despair and learned that life can continue. The wounds were not gone, and even to this day I bear those scars, as we all do. But that's OK. Jesus also bears his scars and God brings us new life in spite of them, sometimes through them.

There is no darkness in our lives that Jesus is afraid of. Jesus has rested in his own tomb. He has descended to death itself. Death and suffering hold no terror for him. There is no darkness we can be in that Jesus will not enter with us. It is in our darkness, when our hearts are wintry, grieving and in pain, that he will gently touch us and spread warmth to our cold selves, spark new life in our hearts. And roll away the stone and let us go free.

And even more than that, Jesus has also left his tomb. He has had the courage and hopefulness and love to walk out of that dark, safe space and back into the world. That is also sometimes hard for us. Jesus is not only able to roll the stone back from the entrance to our tombs, but he is willing to take our hand and lead us out so that we can truly live again, feel the dew on our feet and hear the birds singing in the trees, and re-engage with life.

Jesus has passed through the Valley of deepest shadow, into death itself. God's Spirit reached even there, on this very night, and touched him gently, the touch of love, bringing new hope, new joy and restored life to him. As he does for us. Alleluia! Christ is risen!