

“Where It Is Still Dark, Light” John 20: 1-18
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It’s been a long winter. We’ve all been skittering around on ice and shoveling snow for a long time now. We are READY for some spring, yes? Here we are on Easter, so early in the year, with so much snow still left and the temperatures still so low. Our hearts ache for springtime so much that it is a great temptation, as it always really is at Easter time, to reduce our observance of Easter to a celebration that spring really is coming, to focus on bunnies and blossoms and the greening of the earth. And, all of that, of course, is a gift from God, and spectacular and miraculous, and arguably does capture something of the essence of the meaning of this high Holy Day. We could go the route of the crocus and the daffodil, and it would be nice, but it wouldn’t be enough. The Gospels won’t let us stop at simply noting the miracle of hard, frozen ground morphing into moist, fertile soil bursting with the growth of the crocuses we all hope to see any minute now. It wouldn’t be enough to concentrate on daffodils, though it would certainly be more comfortable than looking into some of the places that Easter makes us look. The day of Resurrection causes us to look into straight into the reality of the tomb, and to confront the evil that put Jesus into one. It makes us acknowledge that in bringing light where there had been darkness, God took sides on a cosmic scale.

His name was Stevie Carson and he lived a few doors down from our house when I was growing up. Thinking back to the time when I was about 8 or 9, I’d say he must have been about 12.....what I then thought of as a BIG kid. Stevie was a bully, plain and simple. He made fun of my friends and me; he would threaten to beat us up. He would throw sticks and pebbles at us when we went by his house. Stevie would even shove my skinny little brothers around, who gamely tried to take him on from time to time; he excelled at throwing them to the ground. To my horror, in fourth grade, our school bus stop was in front of his house. This made for some very nerve-racking times at the bus stop, times when my heart would pound until the bus pulled up, and my legs would sting from the pebbles Stevie threw. One day, as Stevie was winding up for his usual mischief, an even bigger kid, Margaret Mary O’Grady, came walking by. Margaret Mary was a personal hero of mine. She was 16 years old, truly grown-up by my standards, my favorite babysitter, and a personal hero because she had recently allowed me to select a stuffed animal from her vast collection. Most importantly, she was even taller than Stevie. She walked right up to him and told him to get on home, and that she was going to follow him right into his house and tell his mother exactly what he had been up to. She grabbed him by the arm and brought him into his house. Stevie’s mom and dad were nice people, friends of my parents, and we can hope that their disciplinary interventions were just and merciful. Whatever they were, they seemed effective. Stevie stopped tormenting us. Margaret Mary became an even bigger hero!

This is a simple story, one in which the most powerful figure, as the biggest and the oldest, combined her power with her compassion, and took sides; as simple as it is, it helps us make our point about Easter. When God raised Jesus on the third day after Jesus died a terrible death at the hands of imperial bullies, God took sides. God said “no” to the death-making ways of the Roman occupiers of Jerusalem and the handful of corrupt religious leaders who conspired to execute Jesus. God said “no” to any person or system that wields power in a way that crushes or harms the weak and the defenseless. God pulled off a huge reversal, in which the most powerful and dominant political system in the world at that time was shown that even their most cruel and humiliating tactics could not destroy a humble Rabbi. God said “no” to the tomb, “no” to power combined with cruelty, and “yes” to the power of love.

This is pretty challenging stuff, more complicated than rejoicing in the new life of the coming spring. If God makes choices like that, then perhaps God expects us to do the same. Maybe every day we are called to figure out who are the bullies and who are the defenseless ones, and to act in a way that brings healing and justice, whether it's in the schoolyard or on the city streets or in the ways we choose to spend our time and money. It seems God takes the side of those we think of as the losers, in order to take the side of everyone. God's resurrection logic states that if the hungry are fed, it's better for all of us. If the sick are healed, it's better for all of us. If the naked are clothed, it's better for all of us. If the poor are poor no longer, it's better for all of us. When those who have lost out in life can win again, the darkness lifts. God asks us to make choices so that the forgotten of the world can be remembered again, so that the apparent losers can win again. This is the Easter choice, the Resurrection choice, the choice that brings light in the midst of darkness.

Mary Magelene discovered that the stone had been rolled away from the tomb of Jesus while it was still dark. The dazzling Resurrection of Jesus split that night time open into a dark "before" and a luminous "after", the "after" showing us that the even the bleakest of human scenarios can be redeemed with the power of God's love. God in Jesus at Easter time disrupts our growing cynicism and worry with this Resurrection that still reverberates today: it is yet dark in our world in many places and many hearts, but death and destruction are not the whole story and not the end of the story. The Easter pattern is one that says a resounding YES to life, to love, to compassion, to making that right and holy choice for what is good each and every day, even when it's very hard to do so. It's the choice made by Janie, who reconciled with her estranged brother Tom before he died of cancer, despite a very difficult history between them. It's the choice made by Susan and Kearns, who adopted the critically ill and disabled child they had taken in as foster parents, even though they knew he would not live long and his expenses would be very large. It's the choice made by two 9-11 widows to start a foundation to care for widows and orphans in Afghanistan, rather than to seek vengeance. First there was darkness; the Easter choice is made, and then there is light and renewal.

The glory of Easter is surely ours to embrace on a personal level; we can revel in the knowledge that Jesus has done away with death forever. We can embrace with gusto the joy that seeing the sunburst yellow of the forsythias and let it sink right into our bones, and know that its return after winter signals the pattern of our own coming and going and coming again. But the rising of this Rabbi-carpenter who preached justice for the poor and love of enemies points to a more grand and glorious in-breaking of light in the midst of darkness, and not only in the realm of a personal someday beyond the grave. Jesus lived and died and was raised in **this** world, cared about the poor and lonely and sick in **this** world, in the midst of the gritty realities of life in an occupied country. Resurrection, the bringing of light into the darkness, the end of death and destruction at the hands of corrupted power, is meant to be practiced in the here and now.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magelene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. In raising Jesus, God took the side of the small and the weak, in order to take the side of us all. Easter comforts us, inspires us, challenges us with the question in our dark world so in need of resurrection light: whose side *are* we on? Let us choose God's yes to life and love. Let us choose to be on the side of the Risen One, who brings light while it is yet dark.

Amen.