

Sermon by Ted Mosebach
First Congregational Church
United Church of Christ
East Hartford, Connecticut

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In the Dark

It has become a bit of humor for us here at First Church to call our 7:00 a.m. Easter worship opportunity outside the front courtyard of the Meeting House a sunrise event. Admittedly the sun rises well before 7:00 a.m. on any Easter morning. This past Sunday it was a mute point anyway because there was complete cloud cover here. But when there is not cloud cover one can not see the sun from the front lawn of the Meeting House until it rises over the 886 building across the street, and that happens about seven o'clock. From the front yard of the Meeting House we can experience the Easter tradition of sunrise worship without needing to get up quite so early!

Worship on Easter morning at sunrise recognizes what happened on the first Easter. About dawn on that day some women went to the tomb to properly embalm the body of Jesus for permanent burial. They found that the tomb was empty and heard the joyful pronouncement of the angel that Jesus arose from death. John's gospel says that it was even before dawn when Mary Magdalene first visited the tomb. The other gospels say early dawn. Surely then it was no later than first light that the initial discovery of the empty tomb was made. So like the first disciples, we celebrate the resurrection early on Easter morning. It is a wonderful tradition— at its best when one does not stay up too late the night before.

However, a distinction can be made between the time Jesus actually rose and when it was first discovered by the women and then the men who went to the tomb. If it was first revealed around dawn, then the resurrection must have actually occurred before dawn. It must have happened during the night, in the dark. At dawn, the angel said to Mary, *He is not here, but has risen!* (Luke 24:5) That sentence is in the past tense, but with all of the emphasis around going to the tomb at early dawn and worshipping the risen Christ at sunrise, the idea might form in the mind that the resurrection itself occurred then. It did not. It was discovered at daybreak to have already happened.

So when do you think the actual moment might have been when God raised Jesus from the dead? When exactly might the greatest thing that ever happened have taken place? Of course, we do not know, but I like to think that it happened close after midnight Easter day, right at the moment when Saturday became Sunday. Why not? I can sort of imagine God not wanting to wait around. The mystery of death notwithstanding, and while acknowledging also the mystery of whatever was going on with Jesus during the time between crucifixion and resurrection (Peter wrote that prior to resurrection Jesus descended into hell and proclaimed the gospel there), I can imagine God counting down the seconds until the victory and joy of life restored could be given to God's beloved Son. Oh for God to have witnessed the horror of crucifixion to the one

who was the best of all, the fairest of ten thousand, the bright and morning star; the slaughter of Jesus, his physical agony, his broken spirit and broken heart, and the Father's experience of it a double does of suffering by seeing it happen to Jesus as well as experiencing it God's self because God was completely one with Jesus. In that way God's experience of the crucifixion was both objective and subjective. How much longer than the absolute minimum time necessary to fulfill the predicted three day waiting period would God have wanted to tarry? (We can only conjecture about why it was necessary for Jesus to spend three days in death. Perhaps it was that there would be less doubt that death had really occurred if there was a three day waiting period— a sort of wake, if you will. That is the meaning of what some today still call a wake, the time of viewing the body of the deceased and visiting with surviving relatives during the days prior to burial. Previous to our scientific era the certainty of death was more difficult. A period of several days was established prior to burial in case the person was not really dead, but rather in a deep sleep or coma, in order not to unknowingly bury a person still alive. The interval provided an opportunity for the individual to 'wake', which would happen from time to time.) In the case of Jesus, whether it was the intended purpose or not, the three days in the tomb were evidence that death had actually occurred. A person might wake after three days from a coma caused by an illness, but hardly after the torture, bleeding out, and final suffocation of crucifixion.

In any case, consideration of the actual time of Jesus' resurrection suggests an important lesson to us. Sometime before the sun came up on Easter morning, when the disciples were sleeping, or grieving, or worrying, or grieving and worrying and sort of sleeping all at once; while it was dark, when fears and anxieties might be the worst, when human activity subsides, then it was that God was the busiest of all. When the disciples may not have been doing much, when any feelings they may have had of vulnerability and victimization might have been the strongest, when it was dark outside, when their world in every way might have seemed so very dark, then it was that God was busy with the work of their salvation, preparing for the next day, for the great surprise of the renewal of life, the realization of something greater than they were ever able to hope— of resurrection, of restoring life after death.

It would also have been at least close to dark that the disciples gathered together in a room on what the Bible says was Easter evening. They locked the doors because human eyes can not see well at nightfall and people can be uneasy when shadows are deep. Yet it was also during that time of fading light that God once more was busy and suddenly Jesus appeared to the disciples in that room and says during the night, *Peace be with you. (John 20:26)*

During the nighttime, when we are at rest, when we might think our lives are no longer moving forward because we are no longer actively moving them forward, when we might think we are at the most vulnerable, then, in fact, we might instead take hope because then God is active. When the world rests it is out of God's way.

When it might seem to us that nothing is being done about something or other, that all is lost, when we can not see a reason for hope and we are tired and must take our

rest, then we need to remember those nighttime hours of Easter day when great surprises were in the making.

For Easter is all God's doing. When Jesus appeared to Mary in the garden it was God's doing. When Jesus needed to pass through closed and locked doors in order to appear to all the disciples except the absent Thomas, it was God's doing. And it was all God's doing when Jesus appeared the next week, at the same place, and the doors were closed, but this time Thomas was also in the room, and Jesus said to Thomas, *Put your finger in my side and see my hands and believe. (John 20:27)* And Jesus said to him, *Do you believe because you see? Blessed are those who believe without seeing! (John 20:28)*

Might it be fair to elaborate Jesus' words like this:

Do you understand because there is enough light? Well, good for you but how happy are those who believe yet can not see, who understand that darkness and light are both alike to me, who realize that precisely when they can do nothing else I am at work, and the sun will soon rise, even if behind the clouds it will still shine through, and morning will come, and then everyone will be able to see. But Oh so blessed for those, Oh so happy for those, who believe while it is still dark!