

## **While it Was Dark (Easter)**

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In the morning while it was still dark...

That is how the story of Easter begins. Before the trumpets and the alleluias. Before the risen Christ appears to the women and they proclaim his resurrection to the disciples.

Before any of that. The story begins.

In the morning, while it was still dark...

In the morning, while the world was shadowed by the terror of the cross, by the fear of what might come next.

The disciples, scripture tells us, had locked themselves away in hidden rooms, for fear.

The story of Easter begins with isolation.

With people, separated from the world out of fear and uncertainty.

Sound familiar?

The women went to the tomb...

This was not an unusual thing for them to be doing. Even as their world had been shattered by the greatest grief they had ever known, they did what their culture and tradition taught them to do. They went to the stone tomb to anoint the body of their beloved with oil and spices.

They went, longing as we all do in our grief, to do the few last things that human hands can do to honor our dearly departed. To offer one more act of loving care. One more gentle touch.

But that morning they would be deprived of that familiar way of grieving. Their world became even more shadowed when entering the garden they saw the stone rolled away. Grave robbers, or the authorities who had condemned him to die, they didn't know, but it hardly mattered.

The one thing they wanted most to do, they couldn't.

In the moment when they needed their ordinary rituals the most, they found them cruelly pulled away. At that moment when they longed, more deeply than ever, to rely on the routines of life that had carried them through so much pain before. They couldn't.

Sound familiar?

And you know the rest of the story.

The women peered in and were met not with Jesus' body but two angels who tell them that he is risen." Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them run and tell the disciples, who, do not believe them. They think it an "idle tale."

But it is no idle tale.

Eventually it sinks in for all of them.

The impossible has happened. Death —the one thing they thought had defeated Christ's love— had indeed been vanquished by God's astonishing power.

Of course, most years, our worship service embodies that second half of this story. The glory and majesty. The splendor and victory.

This year, I feel a bit closer to the first part of the Easter story.

I feel like I am walking along with those women, in the early morning, while it is still dark.

Because we will be celebrating today perhaps separated from those we yearn to be with.

Because we are all especially attuned to a fearful world.

Because this year, we are meeting the empty tomb with an empty church.

And this year, we can all feel the emptiness.

A month or so ago social distancing was still a new phrase that we were all trying out for the first time.

Back then we were just skipping handshakes and washing our hands, rather than cancelling weddings and wearing masks.

And back then, a few of my colleagues and I raised the question, which seemed like a laughably remote possibility. What if we can't hold services on Easter?

As the pandemic escalated, that conversation became less abstract. And an idea emerged. Several churches I know tried on this idea.

"What if we don't have Easter until we can be back together?"

“What if we take whatever Sunday is our first Sunday back in the Sanctuary, and just call that Easter?”

There was some buzz around this idea, I know a lot of people discussed it.

But I do not know of anyone who followed through on it. There was no big moment when someone brought down the hammer and said, no.

It just kind of, fizzled out.

Almost as if Easter insisted on coming this year. Right on schedule.

Almost as if we all remembered that Easter is our most potent defiance when death rears its head.

Almost as if those women reminded us that they set out toward the tomb while it was still dark.

Almost as if Christ was saying to his church, don't you leave me in that tomb.

Almost as if the Holy Spirit stirred in our hearts, and reminded us: this story begins with emptiness.

And so, in every church I know right now, pastors are standing in front of cameras, telling their people that Christ, the Lord, is risen, *today*.

Because this story, is a word of hope, spoken in emptiness.

When have we needed that more, than we do now?

In his letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes: “I do not want you to be misled, sisters and brothers, for we do not grieve as those who have no hope.”

We do not grieve as those who have no hope. We grieve. Don't miss that. We *do* grieve. But we do not grieve without hope.

Because on Easter, in the depth of grief, we meet a word of hope, spoken in emptiness.

So here is the question, as we look around at the emptiness that is gaping in our lives and in our world.

What word of life will echo through the emptiness?

I don't think we know the answer yet.

But to live in the light of Easter is to believe that emptiness and death are never the end. To live in the light of Easter is to believe that God speaks last, and God speaks love.

What word of life will echo through the emptiness?

One temptation would be to see emptiness and just desire to fill it with what was once there.

I am sure Jesus friends would have been thrilled if he had simply stood up and gone back to his old life until he died at a ripe old age.

It would have been more than they could have asked for. But it was less that what God would do. A word of hope they could not yet quite imagine, and that astounds us to this day, was spoken to them in that tomb.

These days I hear that same temptation in the wondering: “when will things go back to the way they were?”

My answer? “Never. I hope.”

I hope that we do not go back to believing that bagging groceries is an unimportant job. I hope that we do not go back to believing that other people’s healthcare is no concern of ours. I hope we do not go back to taking for granted our ability to gather in person.

I hope that we all notice of how much we were willing to give up to save the lives of the most vulnerable people among us. I hope we remember that the whole world can in fact address a crisis together, with everyone doing their part.

I hope that our neighborhoods may become a bit more friendly, our circles of care a bit more close-knit.

I expect that God will do something greater than we can imagine, something that makes my best imagining truly seem an idle tale.

None of this takes away the grief. None of it dulls the pain. This is not about looking past this moment, or pretending that we are ok.

It is about seeing this moment through the eyes of our faith.

Our faith primes us to expect transformation out of emptiness. Our faith bids us listen for a word of new life in the empty tomb. Our faith calls us to grieve, but to grieve with hope.

Grieve with hope.

We don't know how this will end.

But we do know, that early one morning, while it was still dark, the women went to the tomb...