

Easter Day

While it was still dark...

Isaiah 65:17-25; John 20:1-18

At the Maundy Thursday joint service, I preached on the darkness that fell over the upper room where Jesus had washed the feet of His disciples and shared with them the Last Supper. The darkness followed out on to the Mount of Olives and the Garden of Gethsemane. All through Good Friday the darkness does not lift. The false accusations, the mock trials, the scourging, and the heart-rending crucifixion at Calvary. Then the burial in a stone tomb, and the great stone rolled over its entrance to seal the final darkness of death around Jesus.

On Holy Saturday the emptiness and nothingness continued in the darkness as Jesus' numbed friends and family sat in disbelief and grief at what had happened.

Early in the morning, had she even slept since the death of Jesus, Mary Magdalen was stirring. All alone, weeping for her dead friend, Mary sets out, "while it was still dark..." She knew what she wanted to do, what she needed to do, but she wasn't sure if she would be able to do it. Exhausted, grief-stricken, living on nervous energy, driven by an instinctive desire to do the right thing, but frightened too.

Before we ever get to the garden where the tomb is, in these dark days for our world, Mary represents each one of us. She is the grieving woman in Ukraine, and Russia. She is the refugee, and the immigrant denied a home in a place of safety. She is the one waiting for a medical diagnosis, or for months-long treatment delayed to be started. She is the friend still not able to visit a loved one in a care home, or by a hospital bedside. She is the sister who could not attend her brother's funeral during lockdown, when parties were being organised in Downing Street, then covered up, then lied about, then partially admitted, then fined for law-breaking.

She is the one running before the dawn breaks, "while it was still dark."

Darkness, in John's Gospel, is the symbol of unbelief and lack of understanding and not being able to see. It is often paralysing, as well as depressing.

These last months, even years, have felt for many, like an extended period of darkness. Never underestimate the impact that day-in-day-out news reporting about the awfulness of all that is going on has on our spirits, individually, and as a nation. It's the weather. It's the gloominess of the news. It's the seriousness of the Lenten Bible passages and music in these recent weeks. For some, I know, it can get to be too much. Like Mary we feel we've been running here and there, physically, spiritually, emotionally. Trying to keep the show on the road. Worrying if we should, or should not, do this, or that. Missing loved ones. Missing freedom. Stuck with loved ones. Fearing freedom, and what it might bring. Wanting brightness and light, but fearing what it might reveal, and what has changed, or might need to change. Are we stuck in the darkness of the cave-tomb of Jesus, or running frantically in the dark-before-dawn with Mary? "While it was still dark."

After she ran to tell the disciples about the empty tomb, and they saw, and didn't see. Mary at last stoops low to look into the tomb. Voices in the darkness, clothe in white, tell her to weep no more. But He is not there, He's gone, and still in tears, and darkness, she turns around. And she sees a figure, (the gardener?) and He asks her, "Why are you weeping?" Why are tears darkening your vision? Why can't you see? And He says, "Mary."

The name 'Mary', similar to the name Miriam, from an Egypt word meaning, 'bitter', can also mean, 'beloved'. From the bitterness of her tears to the beloved of light. The Bible says, "she turned." Mary turned. She turned when Jesus said her name, and it was no longer night, for the dawn had come, and the darkness faded, and the light shone. And she saw Him. "I have seen the Lord." The first witness to the risen Jesus, a woman, who had run through the darkness to pay her respects to a dead friend, now stands in that first Easter light seeing her risen Saviour.

Outside our church, on one of our blossom trees, not yet in blossom, the Sunday Club two weeks ago hung early Easter decorations. They did it last year during the lockdown, before we could meet in the Church to worship, and everything was online. People came from all over Edinburgh to marvel at it and photograph it. Some of the young people brought family and friends to see if they could spot the decoration that they had made. I put a photograph of the Easter tree up on the church's Facebook page, amongst other places. Over 13,000 have viewed it.

Now, they're not all here in church this Easter morning. Maybe they're watching online?

One person emailed me to pass on thanks to those who were responsible, and to tell me how it had brought light into her life in a particularly dark time. She'd been driving past, and the traffic stopped on Cluny Gardens just before the junction with Braid Road. And there it was, on a cold grey afternoon, and for her, for that moment, the darkness lifted.

The times have been dark, and the darkness will come and go. But the mendacity of senior politicians will not quell the light. And the heartlessness and inhumanity of the proposal to give one-way tickets to Rwanda to refugees, whatever their age or gender, will not quell the light. And the paralysing fear of Covid will not quell the light. And the pain of losing loved ones will not quell the light. And the economic grimness gripping the world's energy sources will not quell the light. And the blood- stained streets and mass graves of Mariupol will not quell the light. And the cries of unnamed homes in Russia who have lost loved ones in their army, air force and navy will not quell the light. And the forgotten wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, South Sudan, and Afghanistan will not quell the light. And the long sombre days of Lent will not quell the light.

These are all part of this present darkness through which we and the whole world continue to run. But the Easter light will not be quelled.

For wherever the little acts of kindness and love and understanding and welcome and heart-felt humanity are carried out – there the Easter light shines. And it's hard to see it at times. And it's hard to believe it at times. And it's hard to think it will ever overcome all of the terrible darkness at times. But it shines, and it shines, and it shines, and we will have peace. And we will have hope. And we will have joy. And we will have light.

We will have light because we, the children of God today, the witnesses to the effect of the resurrection of Jesus today, are called to be light in this darksome world. Light is the gift from God that through our lives, we offer to the world. Martin Luther King said, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can do that; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can do that."

Demond Tutu wrote that, "Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all the darkness."

Mary Magdalene ran through the streets of fitfully sleeping Jerusalem, while it was still dark. She came to the empty tomb with its stone rolled away, while it was still dark. She ran back to fetch

Peter and John to bring them to the tomb, while it was still dark. She looked tearfully into the empty tomb herself, while it was still dark. She speaks to the mistaken gardener, while it was still dark. Jesus spoke her name, "Mary", and she turned away from the darkness, and stood in His resurrection light.

From this high-up spot I can see you, but I cannot see into your hearts. I cannot know what ails you, or troubles you, or burdens you. I can only guess at what darkness you may be running through. But the light is there, for you, for me, despite all the darkness. Maybe even because of all the darkness.

And that give us hope. This Easter Day, the light still shines. Just as John wrote at the beginning of his gospel, pointing us through life, through death, through despair, through hope, through Gethsemane, through Calvary, and through an empty tomb. "While it was still dark..."

"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen