

Easter is a Dawning Thing

An Easter Proclamation

Text: John 20: 1-10

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I step off with the glad tidings of poetry this glorious Easter Day!

Easter is a dawning thing¹
whose truth takes considerable time
to sink in and take hold.

It's a mysterious thing,
defying prior certainties,
sending human minds running in large circles.

It's a dissonant thing
where the expected and the realized
turn everything upside down and over again.

Could it really be?
Yes, but how? And why?
This is not how it works; it just makes no sense.

Surely this is why those who got to the tomb first
were perplexed and confused -
fearful and running and disbelieving.

But then, to sit with this most sacred of stories
to give it time to settle: as leaven in the loaf,
as a seed in the soil, as transformation born within.

Easter is a dawning thing, all right, slow and silent in rising,
as God's horizon awakens a deeper knowing
and opens the promise of abundant life to the ends of the earth.

Let me put a biblical foundation under my poem. Easter deserves no less! And let's do that tracing the Gospel of John, mystic that he was, with the fingertips of our souls.

I want us to notice first that Easter begins in the dark. This oft-overlooked detail is no small thing. In fact, all four accounts tell us so - which is Bible-speak for "Wake up! Pay attention! This is important!" A careful blending tells us that it happened under the still-dark glow of the sky, in the shadows, on pathways that were barely visible.

John's pre-dawn words are most descriptive: "while it was still dark." He was expressing something of profound spiritual importance in those five words. He understood that a good many Biblical stories report darkness as God's *prima materia*, God's prime

material.² Recall the brooding darkness in the creation stories, or the nighttime of Jacob dreaming of a ladder. Consider Exodus under cover of darkness, and being led by a pillar of light. Conjure how stars in a deep dark sky speak of God in the Psalms, or remember the dry bones that came to life for Ezekiel over night!

Bring it this close. Nearly twenty years ago, I suffered a collapse of exhaustion. An early morning phone call from a funeral director on the first day of my vacation became the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. I simply had no margins left in me. Pam called our doctor, who prescribed me to strict rest ó not for a few days, but for the whole summer. It was an awful time for me, a dark time, a season in which all I could do was wake up only to take another nap. But, here's the mysterious thing: by the grace of God, that shadowed time became transformative for me. It caused me to deepen in places where I had become stuck, and to refocus on what mattered most to me. I cannot explain it to you, but only bear this witness: God did amazing things in me òwhile it was still dark.ö

That's how Easter begins, and it's a dawning kind of thing!

Still tracing, notice now what our first responders at the tomb did when they got there. Again, a harmony of our four reporters hardly paints a picture of what we might associate with Easter.

Mary Magdalene and Peter, Joanna and John, Salome and the other Mary - there was running both to and from the tomb. There was suspicion and talk of a missing body. Confusion spread among them. They were perplexed, grieving and disbelieving. Mary was crying. They were alarmed and trembling. And here's the scarlet thread among all four: they were afraid to the bone. That's the common ground when human-merely-beings come up against the unknown. Friends, this is hardly the stuff of Easter hymns! There is no tympani or brass in this story.

Here's my best hunch. Their fear was born of dissonance, that is: what they thought would be was not, and so they were knocked clear out of their zones of understanding and comfort. Fear is a natural response at such times for all of us, so we can well understand. But deeper: I suspect that their fear served as a kind of buffer and only became a temporary holding ground while they got their senses back; a tentative posture as they began to remember, one at a time, what Jesus had told them. It was only then that the gradual truth assured them that Jesus was still alive.

After all, if Easter is a dawning thing, and dawning takes time, and darkness melts only slowly, even if steadily, then it follows quite naturally that the power of Easter's message takes time to assimilate and absorb. It did for them then. It still does for us now.

And then, best of all! By the evening of that first Easter, or reasonably so, the old darkness lifted and the power of what had come to pass began to sink in. To borrow a phrase from John Masefield's poetic drama, the unmistakable presence of Jesus was òset loose in the world!ö³

Some of them saw him along the road to Emmaus and others on the stony shores of the Sea of Galilee ó though, mind you, those two locations are 90 miles apart! More: one by one they were overcome as his presence dawned in the hearts and minds of Mary and Peter, John and Joanna, Salome and Bartholomew.

More yet: as time passed, in near and long term, like seeds traveling through soil and reaching for light, öthey grew less and less tentative. It didn't happen immediately, not in that moment, not even that day. But over time they became more and more confident⁴ in what had come to pass. öBefore long they came to experience Jesus not as a memory of one who had died but as a presenceö alive and real. Over time they came to trust that the one whom God sent to challenge the powers and principalities of this world lives on!ö

My Easter friends, this is the take-home truth! The very same still-dawning, slow-growing, steady-rising, darkness-lifting, hope-emerging, awareness-opening process that happened on the First Day is God's invitation to all of us. That's simply how Easter works! It is the Living Spirit of Jesus calling each and all to life abundant and life eternal. But human-merely beings as we are, it just takes time, most often lots of time, for the depth of this promise to get through.

So, be patient! Open your hearts! Clear your minds! It is no longer dark! The day has come! Put your fears to rest! The full light of this amazing Easter day invites us to the ömoreö of God and the ödeeperö of Jesus . . . which are unending!

Let the congregation affirm it with me: öChrist is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia! And Amen!ö

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¹ *Easter is a Dawning Thing* Geordie Campbell March 2013. The title is borrowed from a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor with the substance of the poem being mine.

² Benjamin Stewart. öReflections on the Lectionary.ö *Christian Century*. March 20, 2013, p. 23.

³ Halford Luccock. öNews from a Graveyardö in *Marching off the Map*. Harper Books, 1952, p. 86.

⁴ Nancy S. Taylor. öThe Easter Reflection.ö Old South Church, Boston, April 8, 2012.

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