

The St. John's Pulpit

St. John's Baptist Church 300 Hawthorne Lane Charlotte, NC 28204
704.333.5428 www.stjohnsbaptistchurch.org

WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK

Gospel of John 20:1-18

Message Preached for Uptown Congregations Ecumenical Sunrise Service in Romare Bearden Park
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017
The Rev. Dennis W. Foust, PhD, Senior Minister



The transformational New Life of Easter always begins in the dark.

The early followers of Jesus were people who told stories and relied on imagery and symbols. One of their primary images was the contrast between darkness and light. Christian scripture refers to this image of light 73 times; 33 in writings attributed to John. So, it is no surprise to find the story of Jesus' resurrection in John 20 beginning with these words: "Early on the first day of the week, ***while it was still dark***, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb..."

You are familiar with moving forward 'while it is still dark.' On numerous occasions, you have traced Mary Magdalene's footprints. You never begin a day with all of the information you need. More light appears to you over time. You know how to walk by commitment of faith and NOT by sight.

Your commitment of faith brings you here this morning. Celebrating the resurrection of Jesus from Nazareth, you are walking by faith, not by sight. Yes indeed, Christ is risen! And the eternal light of Jesus' life prevents us from ever being overcome by darkness.

Yet, beloved, let's be honest; day by day by day, we are interpreters at the tomb. **The New Life of Easter always begins in the dark.** You walk through the valley of the shadow of death and confront the residue of evil. You hear diagnoses, struggle with chronic pain and battle with disease. You grieve the loss of health and jobs, care for loved ones with limitations and pray. You mourn the passing of spouses, parents, children, siblings, friends and dear pets. You weave disappointments and damaged relationships into your fabric of faith. You search for meaning as you see others honor deceit, immorality, bigotry and violence. You drop an ounce of compassion into an ocean of need as people suffer from victimization. You cry out for justice during a time when integrity is expected to bow at the altar of greed.

Through the light of Christ, we are disciples of God's salvation; walking by faith, not by sight. In Christ, we are learning how God is active in our lives and in the life of the world. Yes, we can be *s-l-o-w* learners under the instruction of God's Holy Spirit. Yet, we follow God's vision revealed in the Way of Jesus. This Way of Jesus includes sacrificial commitment, forgiveness, welcoming the outcast, humility, redemption, reconciliation, community, peace-building, hope-giving, love-blessing, etc. And, like Mary from the village of Magdala, we often discover God's hope 'while it is still dark.' **The New Life of Easter always begins in the dark.**

God's light is not like the anticipated first light of dawn.

God's light often surprises us because we do not expect God to be so faithful and gracious.

John's Gospel proclaims: *"The light shines in the darkness, and darkness did not – has not – will not – cannot – overcome it."*

In her book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*,¹ Barbara Brown Taylor tells of exploring a 'wild' cave; one that is not safe for the general public. At one point, her guide, a retired Presbyterian minister in West Virginia, said, *"This is where we will practice sitting in the dark..."* Barbara wrote, *"...we...let the dark have us."* During her reflections in the cave, she thought about the tomb of Jesus and what happened in the darkness of that cave before there were any witnesses of resurrection light. The resurrection didn't begin with lilies and trumpets. The resurrection began while it was still dark.

The New Life of Easter always begins in the dark.

Beloved, you are like seeds planted in the earth. While it is still dark, you move toward light!

Easter is not a holiday; Easter is a Holy Day showing you how to live every day!

Sunday after Sunday, John Claypool stood in the pulpit as a pastor. However, one Sunday he went into the pulpit *while it was still dark*. Eleven days earlier, his eight year old daughter, Laura Lue, had been diagnosed with acute leukemia. Laura Lue lived for eighteen more months. Along that journey, a friend asked John, *"Those of us who have not been there wonder what it is like in Darkness such as this. Can you tell us?"* John replied, *"I can only share the glimpse of things that came to me from my particular way of looking...important things I learned down where the valley is dark, but where there is light on beyond and out ahead."*² Four Sundays after Laura Lue passed on ahead of us, John told the church that he could not journey along the roads of '*unquestioning resignation*' or '*total understanding*.' He said, *"We cannot absolutize in such a way that either the darkness swallows up the light or the light the darkness. To do so would be untrue to our human condition that "knows in part" and does all its seeing "as through a glass darkly."*³

Beloved, you gathered this morning '*while it was still dark*.'

The New Life of Easter always begins in the dark.

You go into the world proclaiming resurrection hope in dark places.

As you go, echo the words of Paul to Christ's Center City Church in Uptown Corinth, *"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;..."*⁴

For Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

And, we are God's Resurrection people with Easter in our hearts!

Hallelujah! Amen!

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, HarperOne; New York, NY, 2015, pp 111-131, esp. pp 121 and 129.

² John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*; Word Books; Waco, Texas, 1974, p 17.

³ Claypool, p 78-79.

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:8-9