

*At Deep Dawn*¹

Luke 24: 1-12

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I wonder if while circling the earth in outer space
you can see an arched line
that can only be described as earth's deep dawn.

I am sure there is such a thing as deep, deep dawn;
but,
except for the eyes of the heart
and the eyes of the mind,
I have never seen such a thing;

nor, I suspect,
has anyone else
unless it is from outer space looking back.
It's hard to imagine an actual line.

I remember the night on earth Pappy didn't come home.
That was a night of deep dawn.

Actually,

I can't be sure what I remember is that night.
What I more likely remember
is being told the story of that night so often
it's as though I remember it.

We were living in Henderson, Kentucky, at the time.
The whole world was at war.

We knew it would happen.

We knew one night Pappy just wouldn't come home...
no phone call...
no message...
he just wouldn't come home.

As I said,

I can't be sure I really remember the night;
but I surely remember the story
and the deep darkness of it.

I was very, very young...only four or five years old.

I do remember the house

and I especially remember its bathtub.

Strange the details childhood memories gather.

The bathtub was on legs

like the ones at my grandparents' houses

except it was the smallest one I had ever seen.

The only way Pappy could get his 6' 3" frame in the tub
was to lean back and prop his feet in the lavatory
that was strategically located at the end of the the tub
where my brother and I would each wash one foot.

We would tickle him, of course.

That was part of the game.

What fun!

What devotion...

What security;

but, then,

one night he just didn't come home.

We knew it would happen.

We just didn't know when;

but when it happened

it meant

Pappy had been shipped out.

He was a company commander.

His company had been shipped out

to some undisclosed place...

to Europe or Africa

or some such far away continent

to fight in the second war to end war.

The next morning,

Mom packed up the 1941 Plymouth,

two-tone blue

with the gear shift on the column,

and she drove us...

two sons and a dog named Penny....

On rationed gasoline,

she drove us across several states

and a range of mountains

to be near family

until Pappy came marching home again...

if, at all, Pappy would come marching home again.

By my estimate,

though I was too young by far at the time

to know what it was,

somewhere winding around

and across

the Great Smoky Mountains,

deep dawn set in for my mother.

Oh, we only traveled in daylight.
She promised Pappy that much.
Still, deep dawn can happen anytime of day or night.
I suspect it was on some pre-interstate winding road
that my mother knew the heart
and meaning
of deep, deep dawn.

Deep dawn
is that indefinable time
between darkness and light...
that time when the promise in which you believe
is true;
or the promise in which you believe
is a lie.

If everything you believe in is true,
then there is hope.
If everything you believe in is a lie,
then there is no hope.

At just that moment of clarity,
according to the messengers of God,
what you must do
is remember what Jesus taught you.

Interesting, is it not,
that it was women who came to the tomb at deep dawn.
It may be a gift given mostly to women...
this being able to see at the moment of deep dawn;
or maybe it is a gift given also to that within men
that is feminine;
or maybe we simply have to trust the women in our lives
to help us get it right.

All the gospel writers
agree it was women.
They disagree on the names and number;
but they all agree it was women:

For John
it was Mary of Magdela alone.
For Matthew
it was Mary of Magdela
and another woman named Mary.
For Mark

it was Mary of Magdela,
Mary the mother of James
and Solome.

For Luke

it was Mary of Magdela,
Mary the mother of James
and Joanna
plus some other unnamed women;

only, for some reason,
Luke didn't name any of the women
until late in the story.

Each likely had a reason
for remembering the women they named
and when they named them.

The one on whom they all agree, of course,
is Mary of Magdela.

Mary Magdalene, you may remember,
was the seven-demon woman.

Tradition has it that she was a prostitute;
but there's not one ounce of biblical witness
to a shred of truth to such a myth.

What we know is that she was disturbed...
severely disturbed...

pathologically disturbed;
and she was made calm and sound by the power of
her belief in the grace and truth of Jesus.

For each of the gospel writers,
it seems to have worked like this:

If the grace and truth of Jesus
can bring hope and wholeness to Mary of Magdela,
the grace and truth of Jesus
can bring hope and wholeness to anyone.

I wonder if my mother felt possessed of seven demons
as she wound across and around the mountains
with her two sons and their dog named Penny
on the morning after Pappy couldn't come home.

On the first day of the week,
Mary of Magdela and the other women
went in the tomb
with spices prepared to ward off death's indignity.

Only Luke described the moment

as being at deep dawn.²

John says Mary came early.
Matthew says it was toward dawn.
Mark says it was very early.
Only Luke says it happened at deep dawn.

Even for Luke
 most translators render the phrase *early dawn*;
 but, for Luke, the poet,
 and for Luke, the believer,
 the phrase really is *deep dawn*.
 Maybe the translators think
 there are not enough poets
 and deep believers among us
 to understand when deep dawn is.

Perhaps from outer space
 you can see the arched line
 that separates earth's daylight and darkness.
 I can tell you, however,
 as one who regularly haunts
 the early morning hours right here on earth, from earth,
 the line between daylight and darkness
 is not a line you can actually see.
 All you can say
 is that, for those who have eyes to see,
 at deep, deep dawn
 light begins to happen....

Maybe on earth,
 it is not a line everyone can see;
 but it is a time everyone knows:

Deep dawn, for example,
 is that moment
 just after the doctor comes in and says
 it's cancer...
 and then says
 these are the things she can do;
 but she can make no promises.

At that moment,
 everything you have been taught to believe about hope
 is true or
 it is a lie...

either you believe there is hope
or you believe there is nothing but disease.

At that moment,
you must remember what Jesus taught you.

Deep dawn
is that moment
just after you hang up the phone
and you have to go the police station
to pick up your son or your daughter.

At that moment,
you believe there is hope for a new beginning
like Jesus taught;
or you believe there is nothing
but angry rebellion
and angry retribution.

Deep dawn
is that thin-line moment
when the authorities finally let you pass
and you first stand
in the debris of the twin-tower symbol of wealth's shallow hope
or in the debris the five-sided symbol of wishful security
with the relics of shallow hope and wishful security buried
with family mementos and body parts.

At that moment,
you believe there really will be peace on earth as the
angels promised
when they announced the birth of Jesus
or you believe there is nothing
but an angry god winking at terror's destruction.

According to Luke,
on the first day of the week,
when the women,
led by the Magdalene,
went to the tomb and didn't find a body,
all it did was leave them perplexed.

An empty tomb proves nothing.
An empty tomb *means* everything;
but an empty tomb *proves* nothing.
What the empty tomb means
can only be known by truth known to faith...
by the truth born of the God of belief.

According to Luke,
when the women found the tomb empty
and were standing there perplexed,
the angels...
or whatever the men in white might have been...
the angels did not say to the women:

“See the tomb is empty;
and that proves Jesus is risen.”

What the men in white said to the women
was this:

“Remember what he taught you...
remembering what he taught you
is what will help you believe your Jesus is alive.”

It happened
at deep, deep dawn....

Like at that moment
just after we read in the paper or heard on the news
there is some faint shadow of a prospect of peace on one front
and we are reminded of how tentative peace on earth really is...
of how peace in Northern Ireland
or peace in New York City
or peace in our town
or peace in any known family room
is dependent on people a lot like you and me.

Today we must remember
how Jesus taught us
the meek really will,
at last,
inherit the earth.

We do believe that,
don't we?

Today we must remember
how Jesus taught us
the peacemakers really are the children of God.

We do believe that,
don't we?

Today we must remember
how Jesus taught us
that the ones who stand for what is right
will be blessed.

We do believe that,
shouldn't we?

It all happened
at deep dawn on Easter morn.

Like that moment just after
some wild and disheveled person
gets out of a beat-up car full of dirty children
and meets you in the parking lot after worship
to ask for a hand out.

Remember just then how Jesus taught us
faith really can cast out demons
which in the language of the twenty-first century
is the same as restoring calm...
calm and its partner hope.

In most cases giving money in the parking lot won't help
and it could even do harm,
but remember just then how Jesus taught us
that feeding the hungry really
is the same as feeding Jesus;
and working together with other people of faith,
we really can make a difference...
we really do make a difference.

When you see the dirty children in the beat-up car,
at least remember how Jesus taught us
that of such is the Kingdom of God.

It always happens
at deep dawn.

Deep dawn

that moment just after the news is bad
like when one parent comes home and says to the other
I don't love you any more...
or when someone says
I am powerless over my addiction...
or when the boss says
your job has been phased out....

Just then you must remember
how Jesus taught us:
"Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden,
I will give you rest..."
"I am with you always even to the close of the age..."
"This is my body broken for you..."

then you will know
there is hope that will not let you go.

Perhaps you've heard me say it before,
and you'll likely hear me say it again,
but it is nevertheless still true:

I do not know anyone who first believed Jesus rose from the dead
and then believed in Jesus.
Everyone I know who believes Jesus rose from the dead,
first believed in Jesus.

Like my mother
on the morning after
the night my Pappy couldn't come home:

To know hope,
she had first to remember what she had been taught,
though I suspect, for her,
what she had been taught
was so much a part of her
she could not possibly have forgotten.

If you long for hope
that will not let you go...
If you want the children
to grow up surrounded by kindness born of truth;
If you long for the world
not to self-destruct,
this is the story you must remember
and this is the story the church must tell:

Remember how once a long time ago
a decree went out from Caesar Augustus
that all the world should be enrolled.
Then remember and tell
how Jesus was born
in Bethlehem of Judea; and
how he was tempted in the wilderness;
and how when he was baptized
the heavens opened and God said,
 "This is my son...listen to him" and
how he took little children on his knee
and said,
 "Of such is the kingdom of God";
and how he taught us
to turn the other cheek

and to love neighbor as self; and
how he made sick people well
and crazy people sane; and
how when the disciples were in trouble
he walked to them on water; and
how he fed a multitude
with five loaves and two fish...
never mind
that the ones we tell are not apt to believe
such wild stories as those
just so long
as they know the stories so they, too,
when the time is right, can remember; and
we must remember and we must tell
the story of the Prodigal Son
and of the Good Samaritan;
and the Lost Sheep;
and the Invested Talents;
and all the rest.

And we must remember and we must tell
how he demonstrated
that dying for someone else's sin
is the love
that will keep the world
from self-destructing.³

Do not misunderstand.
I don't think for one minute
we should pressure anyone
to believe the story.
Rather we must be sure we remember
and we must be sure the children and others know
so they, too, can remember.
Belief will come in God's own time.

In those moments of deep, deep dawn,
when you remember what he taught you,
you will know...
you will believe...
you will be sure
there is hope so strong
not even the grave can contain it.

That hope for us is the truth of Jesus of Nazareth.

Notes

¹ I am grateful more than I can say for the excellent work of Rick Spalding presented in a paper on the text to the 1998 meeting of the Movable Feast. In particular, I am grateful for his emphasis on the translation of the text that resulted in the title of this sermon.

² Ibid.

³ This summary of Luke's Gospel is contained in several of my earlier sermons.