

Deep Dawn

Luke 24:1-12

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So arrives the day that recreates us—the day born out of such an agony of labor this week—the day that in its coming splits time in two. It seems to arrive like lightning: the sudden bright reversal discloses something about who we are and hope to be, and seems to teach us to measure all time from the flash.

After the flood of events and feeling that suffocated Jerusalem for the past several days, the narrow stone streets of the city are hushed and still thick with darkness as the women set off on their errand. For them probably the most pungent thing about the morning is not the burial spices they bring, but the chaos that has been loose in the streets, begging confrontation. Easter morning for these three women starts as a pilgrimage into the binary clarity of things: death or life, abandonment or accompaniment, absence or presence—and, eventually, doubt or faith.

A few summers ago I was in Jerusalem myself, looking for whatever spiritual clarity I could find, and while I was there, I happened to catch a terrible cold. My head and my chest were a misery to me and to the others in my group who had to listen to all the sounds of my slow suffocation. One of my cohort-mates offered to give me a back massage, but I couldn't bring myself to believe that mere fingers would reach anywhere near where the congestion was. After several more days of my liquidity, though, she offered again, and by then, for the sake of the rest of the group if not my own, it seemed worth a try. Her name was Margaret: she was an Irish nun, now a middle school teacher in Australia. While she worked on my shoulders and neck, we talked about how stepping into the streets of the Holy City felt like stepping into a flood. After a while, as I relaxed, the conversation began to blur a bit; I'm not sure if we were speaking about the past or the present. But there was a moment of silence, just the working of Margaret's fingers, and then she said something I can't forget (in an Aussie-infused brogue that made the words glow). Maybe it was even partly the words she said that cured the cold, because it was *completely* gone the next morning. Margaret said, "You know, I think there're really only two emotions: love and fear. If you think about it, everything else comes somehow from one or the other of them. Or a combination."

The story of this day is an alchemy of love and fear. There must have been enough of each at work in the narrow streets in those few intense hours to give anyone a chance to catch their death down through the centuries. Every thread of feeling you can trace through the labyrinthine streets of the Easter story, if you think about it, seems to wind its way back to the confrontation between love and fear: the shame of Peter..., the expediency of Pilate..., the devastation of Mary..., the anger of Judas

Iscairiot... the skepticism of Thomas... the astonishment of the two who walked to Emmaus... Love and fear are the primary colors from which come a spectrum of human shades as wide as the world itself.

And maybe it's as true of the boulevards of Boston on this morning as it certainly is true of the squares of Kiev or the streets of Colorado Springs, that hardly anyone comes on the bright morning errand of this day who hasn't been following one or the other, or probably both, of those threads, love and fear, and wondering whether one or the other might have finally won the unequivocal victory during the night. Will the heavy stone that blocks the unanswered prayer still be in the way? What will be inside the place that had been so full of death? Has the tender thing that had been planted indeed now been trampled beyond recognition? Will the morning restore the safety that made life seem possible before, reinstate the Presence that made life seem bearable? Will light and color dispel the doubts, or confirm the loneliness, or reignite the grief this Easter?

The women of the first Easter, whose footsteps we follow into ours, could hardly have undertaken a more fearful or more loving errand. They knew what they could expect: to sit down in the roaring silence between love and fear and tenderly anoint the shattered corpse of their hero, their teacher, their friend. But what they found was infinitely less conclusive, more ambiguous, than that: the heavy stone rolled aside, the corpse not in its place, the dead one nowhere to be found among the bereft living. The burial spices in which they'd found the small comfort of something, at least to do, now were useless.

But Luke tells us that it was something else they brought with them that turned out to be redemptive. For the messengers who greeted the women said, "He is not here. *Remember* how he told you... that the Son of Man, Humanity's own Child, must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and on the third day rise?" *Then they remembered*, Luke says; then they began to recognize how precious was what they had really brought with them through the darkness before the day. And if it was the threads of love and fear that they followed into the maze of streets, it was *remembering* that got them out again. It was *remembering* that helped them navigate the derision of the men who received their news as "an idle tale," their careful, deliberate putting together of things they had heard, seen, felt, things no one's scorn could take from them: things he had said before he died, ways he had engaged their hearts, times when fear, for all its looming power, couldn't hold a candle to love. Perhaps, in their spreading out again and again the fragments of story and promise and hope, like a child spreading out again and again a beloved collection, its priceless value began to emerge. "Perhaps [as the poet says] in their telling of it, they may happen on the truth of it."

Luke is the evangelist of holy memory. The soaring contribution of his gospel to history was simply, for him, an instance of the same work that all who had known Jesus were called to do, and all who would follow Jesus: to search the memory for bits of the truth and piece them together, to glean from the harvest of a thousand fragmentary insights an emerging picture of a grace and love so expansive as not only to fill history, but to *be* history.

Luke is the one, remember—*remember!*—who tells how, as the newborn Jesus lay in the manger with awestruck shepherds gathered 'round, Mary "kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (2:19). All those things she kept, and pondered: the luminous remembrances of his face among the faces of children, the little waves of delight that rippled out from his stories, the ecstatic kiss planted on his temple by one whose twisted, useless legs he had straightened. And other recollections, too, no less vivid, no less important: memories of the threats of the authorities, the way the sky above him and even the air around him seemed to fill with shadow and terror in those last few days. Memories of the abuse he endured, each lash of it, and the way attempts to shame him seemed to roll off the hony dignity of his shoulders all the way to the end. All that love and fear in their infinite combinations, retold and pondered 'til on a certain lightning day that seemed to have taken forever to be born out of the labor of his life, the remembering finally bore its fruit, and she understood at last where her history was going.

Oh, yes, there is haste in the elation of Easter day—a hurried errand through the darkness, like the precipitous unleavened meal of the Jews before their breathless escape into the night, a burst of electric astonishment emanating from an empty tomb in the rock where nothing was as it was expected to be. A mélange of love and fear that, at times, seemed undecipherable, inconclusive, permanently ambiguous.

But sometimes it's only slowly, only by turning over and over again in their memories the pieces, the words, the images, that the followers of Jesus begin to fathom what God is doing at Easter. Through the whole sweep of this gospel, the pieces are there for the taking, for the remembering: one teaching that you'll hear, then forget, then be stirred to remember later, one guffaw of disbelief that will morph into a question and then into a pale dawn of insight wrapped in a memory and then girded into mission, that then, lo and behold, will have turned out in the end to have changed the course of your history, and of history itself.

In fact, the dawn doesn't break in a bolt, like lightning. Dawn never really breaks at all, any more than love ever vanquishes fear with one final, definitive thrust. A new day doesn't displace an old one at a line of scrimmage. If peace ever comes to the gun-tortured streets of this country, its coming will be more like dawn than like lightning. The very first light of dawn isn't hostile to the darkness; it starts almost as a part of the darkness, as the darkness is part of the light. At dawn, it almost seems as though the night simply turns, slowly revealing some startling new side of its nature one atom at a time. It's almost as though light and darkness spend the dawn yearning for each other, reaching into each other, aching to be remembered by us as parts of one whole.

Luke alone, among the evangelists, uses a unique pairing of Greek words to open his Easter story: "*in deep dawn*, on the first day of the week...." I suspect that most of us find our way through the narrow streets to Easter through something like "*deep dawn*"—that time of day when you can't yet be absolutely sure what it is you're seeing, that season of the day when things that had seemed to oppose each other hint at oneness, intimations of a scope of grace we can scarcely imagine and would never expect.

For some of us, at least some of the time, Easter steals upon us not with a trumpet fanfare or a flash of unequivocal light or insight or evidence, but in an infinitesimal turning of our nature toward its wholeness, a thread-by-thread reweaving of fear and love, a deliberate recollection of all the grace we have gathered and all the story that has ever saved our lives, an atom by atom transfiguration of an old day into a new day.

For some of us, the way to Easter through the narrow, winding streets is Luke's way: keeping things and pondering them in our hearts, turning one memory at a time, one intimation, one attitude, one choice at a time—turning them so carefully toward the light to reveal the startling newness of our resurrected nature in Christ. In deep dawn.

Note

John Drury, in his article on Luke in *A Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Alter/Kennedy (Boston, Harvard Univ. Press, 1987), page 424.