

Sermon Easter Vigil Apr 3 2021  
Redeemer, Ramsey  
Pastor M Linderman

Grace, Mercy, and Peace from God our Creator and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

How many stages of growth and development has your faith gone through over time? In many ways, our faith is a mystery within our hearts. It ebbs and flows over the years, making itself strong in certain times, and then at other times seeming to grow weak, such that we hardly can say we have faith.

The times of shadows, when our faith is weakest, can be the hardest times in our lives. Faith, if we even truly had it before, seems to be constantly beaten back by the voices of doubt that fill our hearts and minds.

Tonight's service begins in the shadows for a reason. According to the narrative of Jesus' passion, Holy Saturday is for the disciples the first full day without Jesus. They have lost their master, their rabbi, their lord, in a horrific turn of events. Helpless to do anything to prevent his arrest, torture and execution, they are now helpless without him. They feel guilty, angry, despondent. They are in the shadows now.

In these shadows of Holy Saturday, in the story of Jesus' disciples, we hear an echo of our empty faith, our disbelieving hearts, and the times when we too have felt that Jesus is gone.

Some of us can say to our hearts, remember what it was like when doubt was all you knew, and you cynically held onto the easy fundamentals, thinking they were the marks of a hero's brave resolve in the face of a meaningless universe. There is life, there is death, there's taxes, and that's all, so try to enjoy it while you can.

Or maybe the shadows of your doubt were tinged with grief and hopelessness. Why have faith if life is just a series of disappointments and heartbreak? I mean, just look at the way people act toward one another. Why get invested in anything if it can be taken away from you, by accident or the recklessness, or even maliciousness of other people? Look at what corporations and governments do to

innocent people. Maybe your mind wanted to reach out to Jesus in faith, but your broken heart kept pulling you back into despair.

This past year has been especially difficult. The pandemic, and all its losses, of people and other less tangible things, has been very tough. In the midst of the pandemic, we have also weathered great upheaval in our lives, in our nation, and in our world. We have struggled with loss on so many levels. It would not surprise anyone to say that our faith has been tested this past year. For some, faith itself has been mortally wounded.

For such reasons as these, but also because the church has done this for so long, we are willing to follow the flow of this ancient service tonight, and begin in the shadows. When we consider it all, everything that we have been through, and all the challenging things we may yet have to endure, we understand now what the shadows mean.

And in tonight's Vigil, this service of anticipation of the dawn of Easter, we are called to contemplate what is perhaps the most unique point of Christian proclamation, namely that low and behold, God knows the shadows too. And not just in some divine, omniscient way. God in Christ has known the shadows in a very personal way. And on Holy Saturday, the symbolism of this service proclaims that God meets us in the shadows. The God whom we proclaim, the God Christian faith believes in, has in fact hallowed the shadows himself, by his very physical, psychological and emotional presence. The God of the incarnation is not a stranger to the shadows of life, but in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God insists to us, I know the shadows too. I know their terror, I know their emptiness, I know their despair. I've been there for a reason, God says, so that I may bring you all into the light for good.

And so, in the midst of our faith journey, in the midst of our loss, tears and struggles, we start tonight in the shadows, and light the lamp of Christ's love in the world again. That light starts small. It may seem insignificant. But it grows through the night and into the morning. The light of Christ, which burned brightly in his amazing ministry, and then was snuffed out in his crucifixion, now lights our way again, this time coming from inside the shadows of death, and leads us out into the full radiance of Easter joy.

When we listen to the word of God revealed in scripture, tonight, we hear that God has in fact been busy building up a resumé of redemption for a very long time. In the story of creation, we find that God has been a good God to all people through time and space, in the goodness and beauty and magnificence of what God created. In the story of the Exodus, God initiates a special people into a special covenant relationship. God frees them from slavery in order to bring them to a promised land where they can live faithfully as God's people. In the later prophecy of Isaiah, we learn that actually, God intends the freedom and dignity of such a covenant for all people, and will work to make that happen. In the story of the fiery ordeal, we learn that God is willing to accompany his people wherever they may have to go. There is with the three men who are thrown into the Babylonian furnace a fourth, is it the Lord, who is with them even in the depths of a disastrous death. In the end, the flames have no effect, their lives are saved, and even the king of a gentile nation comes to proclaim the power and faithfulness of the God of Israel.

These stories in scripture are a testimony to that partnership over the centuries. Yes they are old, yes we forget them, and pay them little mind in our daily lives. But tonight they call us to remember; God has saved his people before, and thus, we are called to this hope, that God saves his people now, and will save his people again.

And thus we celebrate tonight that Christ's tomb is opened. The tomb is empty. The Lord is risen! Now our hearts are lifted by the promise of eternal life.

Wasn't it really the weight of death, in the shadows of death, that held you in the thrall of doubt? Wasn't it really the weight of grief that forced you into despair? Look what has happened to death! Look what the Lord has made of weeping and mourning! The victory of the empty tomb is God's long-promised answer to the defeat of the cross. And for you and me, that translates into new and abundant life that starts now and will carry us into the future. Jesus is on the move, and we are to leave the shadows of the tomb behind. Jesus is out and about, moving, stirring and shaking up the world around us. And he sends the spirit now to remind us of these promises, these moments of salvation for his people in the past, and promises us the gift of his loving and merciful presence now and in the future.

So move church, rise up and move, and go out into the world to greet him. Let us rejoice with God and with Jesus our risen lord. And let us not waver in faith, but embrace with all our heart God's faithfulness and steadfast love. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, Amen.