

While It Was Still Dark, Christ is Risen
A Sermon for St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul, MN
by The Rev. Craig Lemming, *Associate Rector*
The Great Vigil of Easter, Saturday, April 20, 2019

In the Name of the Risen Christ. Amen.

Kindling and sanctifying New Fire; sharing the Paschal Candles firelight; chanting the *Exultet*; re-telling our sacred, ancient faith narratives; the aroma of flowers; the water and chrism oil of Baptism; the ringing of bells; and the exquisite music. Each and every one of these beautiful aspects of tonight's liturgy are in and of themselves sublime Sermons. I am also told there are delicious, fizzy, festive beverages for us to enjoy after this service. As such, my Homily will be a brief.

Some of you know that I am an introvert. As an introvert, I am drawn to the contemplative spiritual practices of our Christian tradition. As I was being formed for the Priesthood the evening liturgies saved my life: Choral Evensongs here at St. John's or the broadcasts on BBC Radio 3¹ (yes, I am a devoted Evensong geek), Daily Evening Prayer on my own at home, and Sung Compline in this Chancel on Thursday evenings were healing balm that restored my weary, introverted soul. My mind, body, and spirit drink in this divine nourishment to slake my thirst and to satisfy my hunger along this arduous journey of ordained ministry.

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006tp7r>

Those who follow me on Facebook know that I am slightly obsessed with the TV series *Call the Midwife*. Fellow fans of *Call the Midwife* will agree that the scenes when the community of nuns and nurses gather in the Chapel of Nonnatus House to sing Compline every night, are some of the most moving and exquisitely beautiful moments in television. These hard-working, faithful midwives are present, every day, to the chaos of life's deepest and most harrowing sufferings as well life's most exquisite and sublime joys. And in that thin, liminal space, every night, at the end of their incredibly difficult, strenuous work days, the midwives pause to chant in simple, ancient tones the Psalms, Prayers, and Canticles of the night Offices. To quote my favorite of the nuns on *Call the Midwife*, the mystic, Sister Monica Joan, "**I deem Compline a place of succor for the soul in disarray.**"²

After witnessing the torture and crucifixion of Jesus, Mary Magdalene was "a soul in disarray." We hear in tonight's Gospel, "**while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.**" Unlike the three synoptic Gospels in which the women's witness of the Resurrection of Jesus takes place at dawn – Mark's version even states "after the sun had risen" – it is St. John the Evangelist's Gospel

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https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/view_episode_scripts.php?tv-show=call-the-midwife-2012&episode=s03e08

which tells us that Mary Magdalene's encounter with the Risen Christ takes place "while it was still dark."

Darkness traditionally and poetically has been associated with that which is sorrowful, threatening, evil, or bleak. For the Johannine community of the first century for whom John's Gospel was originally intended, as a marginalized, minority community, oppressed and persecuted by Rome, caught in the midst infighting between Gentile Christians and Jewish Christians, and the bitter conflicts between Christians in general and Jews, their existential reality, like Mary Magdalene's was indeed sorrowful, terrifying, and bleak. And yet, "while it was still dark," Mary Magdalene – so shattered in her grief, utterly confused and desperate – does not, cannot, at first, even recognize the Risen Christ. That is, until *that* moment, when Jesus calls her by her name, "Mary!" In *that* sublime moment, Mary Magdalene is still, listens, hears, turns, and recognizes her Teacher, the Risen Christ, "while it was still dark."

We live in a world that is still dark. Nevertheless, "while it was still dark" Christ still rises. Christ is always present with us while it is still dark. The words from Daily Evening Prayer remind us that "Yours is the day, O God, yours also is the night; you established moon and sun;" divine words that invite us to "Seek the

one who made the Pleiades and Orion, and turns the deep darkness into the morning, and darkens the day into night,” that “darkness is not dark to you, O Lord; the night is as bright as the day; darkness and light to you are both alike.”³ Like the thousands of confused, grieving, and desperate souls who suffer the same disarray of Mary Magdalene’s soul, it is in the stillness of the evening, when we are called to “let our fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives rest in [Christ],”⁴ whose presence is always with us, and whose still, small voice calls each of us by name to be still, to listen, to hear, and to turn to new life.

In his book, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation*, Fr. Martin Laird describes how contemplative prayer invites us into what he calls “the groundless ground of God.” He writes,

This luminous ground of God, is the ground that upholds all creation, “the Love that moves the sun and the other stars” as Dante put it, the depths of our own heart, awareness itself utterly steeped in and saturated by God. Here we move into the promised land, the self-forgetful consummation in silence of our created identity, transformed from image to likeness (Gen 1:26), manifestly hidden “with Christ in God” (Col 3:3).⁵

³ *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 115-116.

⁴ <http://liturgy.co.nz/lord-it-is-night>

⁵ M S. Laird, *Into the Silent Land: A Guide to the Christian Practice of Contemplation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 68-69.

While it is still dark, many of us, like Mary Magdalene are shattered with grief, utterly confused and desperate. When we pause to be still, to listen, to hear, and to turn, we, like Mary Magdalene, recognize the Risen Christ, while it is still dark.

During the Holy Season of Lent, many of us studied Robert Johnson's classic text, *Owning Your Own Shadow*. Johnson reminds us that,

our own healing proceeds from that overlap of what we call good and evil, light and dark. It is not that the light element alone does the healing; the place where light and dark begin to touch is where miracles arise.⁶

On this night, when light and darkness touch and miracles arise; when earth and heaven are joined and we are reconciled with God; we remember that "while it was still dark," Mary Magdalene recognized the Risen Christ right beside her. And the Gospel's proposition doesn't end there. We must celebrate like Mary Magdalene, the First Apostle, who ran and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" We must be witnesses to the Risen Christ who illumines the darkest of nights with celestial brightness – "the luminous ground of God" in whom all of us live and move and have our being.

⁶ Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 111.

In closing, I leave you to ponder, relish, and drink in the magnificent words of Russian Religious Philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev, who wrote these words in 1933 amidst the grim aftermath of the Great War and the Russian Revolution.

What is certain is that the veils of falsehood are torn away and we can see both good and evil in their plain nakedness. Night is not less wonderful than day, it is equally the work of God; it is lit by the splendor of the stars and it reveals to us things that the day does not know. Night is closer than day to the mystery of all beginning.⁷

While it is still dark, Christ is Risen. The Lord is Risen indeed.

Alleluia.

Amen.

⁷ Nikolai Berdyaev, *The End of Our Time: Together with an Essay On the General Line of Soviet Philosophy*, 2nd ed., trans. Donald Attwater (San Rafael, CA: Semantron Press, 2009), 70-71.