

Sermon: It Dawned on Me
Text: Luke 24:1-12
Date: April 21, 2019
Context: WWPC
Easter Sunday
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb. . .

Luke 24:1

We broke with custom this morning.

Rather than my reading a traditional Easter text just before starting this sermon, as we ordinarily do, we decided to tell the story in a different way today. As you plainly saw, we opted to re-enact it before the service really even began.

We did this for two reasons.

First because if Easter teaches us anything, it underscores the necessity of getting out of the box.

The central truth of this day is that you can't nail God down, however hard you try. And if we're not prepared to shift our practice of where this story comes in our service, and how we tell it, well, then we're certainly not ready to experience the power of resurrection.

But we also shifted our practice this year because re-enacting this story in this way highlighted one thing we don't know and one thing we do.

We don't know how the resurrection happened. None of the Easter texts, not a single one, speaks to what happened in that tomb.

Was it a bolt of lightening that blasted that stone aside and brought Jesus back from the dead? As though some unseen hand applied two shock paddles to his lifeless chest and jolted the breath back into him. Shocked his inert heart back into a pulsing rhythm.

Flash! Bang! Arise! It's entirely possible it happened that way.

Or maybe it happened more gradually. Maybe Jesus' eyes just slowly fluttered open, like a bear's might open after a long winter hibernation -- if the bear were dead and suddenly began to live again.

We don't know how it happened, because the writers don't bother to tell us, perhaps because resurrection is beyond knowing, so far beyond our categories there's no point in even trying to describe it.

What we do know is that everything that happened on that first Easter morning happened in the dark, including the moment when three grief-stricken women arrive at the tomb.

They arrive with burial spices in hand, the salves and ointments they need to prepare Jesus's body for its eternal rest.

But it's not entirely clear their hopes will be realized. Surely they know the tomb has been sealed with a very heavy stone. Maybe all they want to do is to touch that stone, to be as near to Jesus as they can be.

But whatever their intentions, whatever their hopes, what happens is not what they expect. When they arrive, they find the stone has been rolled away, the tomb now empty.

They are perplexed. They do not immediately understand that the absence of a body is not bad news.

They do not yet realize that new life always begins in darkness. The bulb in the ground. The embryo in the womb. Their savior in a tomb.

The truth of Easter has not yet dawned on them. All they know is that Jesus is gone.

So they stand there, in the darkness, their minds churning, their hearts breaking.

And the truth of our lives is that at some point every person in this room has been right there with them, weeping for things you've loved and lost, grieving your own private pain, struggling to make sense of what has happened to you, struggling to see the way forward through the gloom.

Maybe you're there now.

On Friday I was getting ready to leave the house and to come prepare the sanctuary for our Good Friday service -- a special presentation of a new orchestral work called *Seven Last Words of the Unarmed*, by Joel Thompson, the venerably African American composer.

As I was getting ready to leave, my sweet wife noticed I was dressed all in black. She said it made her sad. That the day itself made her sad.

I replied that every story that matters, every story that endures through time, has a moment when it feels like hope is lost. When it feels like hope has died.

Good Friday is of course that moment in the Christian tradition.

So we gathered in the sanctuary to watch this extraordinary performance.

The piece uses the same verbal structure as Joseph Haydn's famous composition: *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, to tell a story from our time that bears some remarkable similarities to the story of Good Friday.

A story about how unarmed African American men continue to be killed by state security forces.

A terrible trend that must surely feel like an ongoing moment in the African American experience when hope has died.

So we sat there, a predominantly white congregation, in solidarity with our African American sisters and brothers.

But I also invited people to let themselves feel their own grief, to lament the things they've lost, to mourn the hopes that feel like they are slipping away from them.

The heartbreak we all felt on Monday as we watched the cathedral of Notre Dame burn. The threat our country is experiencing at the present moment, with deepening partisan division, the loss of our treasured American values, the loss of our Christian values.

I believe it was a meaningful observance for all of us who were there. People lingered to pray, and just to sit and feel what they were feeling.

When everyone finally left, we began to turn the sanctuary in preparation for today, placing white cloth underneath the all black shrouds.

Here's the problem: As important as it is to tell, and even to re-enact, this story, you can't just walk into church three days later, watch as a pair of young angels roll the stone away and expect everything to be instantly better the moment the risen Christ emerges from the tomb.

You can't just flick a switch and make the darkness go away by flooding it with light. Easter alone, the fact of it, the truth of it, does not immediately erase our losses, or instantly heal our grief.

Just this morning, Easter morning, we read a story in the news that is now all too familiar, of how more than 150 people in Sri Lanka were killed when terrorists fueled by hate bombed a numbers of churches and hotels, leaving an entire country to mourn, and the Christian population to feel trapped in the tomb with the lifeless body of Jesus.

Nowadays, Easter can seem . . . let's say distant. For many people, perhaps even for most people, it's just easier to believe that the resurrection did not happen.

Indeed, it's almost fashionable in certain circles to believe that it did not. Or that Easter is just a story. A wonderful story, to be sure, powerful even, but one that sometimes feels like it has little bearing on the modern world.

And so we find work-arounds. Easter is a metaphor. The resurrection is figuratively true. We describe it in similes: *Easter is like a butterfly* . . .

These similes and metaphors can be helpful. I get that. And I'm certainly the last person who is going to be dogmatic about the specifics of what happened on that first Easter morning.

But I want to get beyond specifics today. They didn't trouble the Gospel writers whose accounts of that morning all differ, who didn't even bother to describe the resurrection itself, so I don't want them to bother us.

Because I believe a better option is available to us today.

Given that it is sometimes fashionable to believe that the resurrection did not happen, I want to invite you today to do something even more radical. I want to invite you to believe that it did.

I want to invite you to look into the empty tomb for yourself. And when you see that Jesus is not in there, I want to invite you not to weep, but believe that he rose again.

Yes, it's an act of faith, a leap into the unknowable. But here's what happens when you take that leap. For one, you immediately get healthier.

It's true. Last week, on Palm Sunday, we saw how medical science is starting to better understand how emotions like anger and stress are causing inflammation in our blood cells and our joints, and how this inflammation is linked to arthritis and cardio-vascular disease and even dementia.

But it turns out the opposite is also true. Emotions and experiences like joy and awe, love and wonder, all serve to reduce inflammation in our blood, and inflammation in our souls.

So believe that he rose again. Let yourself feel the joy of Easter, the wonder of resurrection. Because here's what will happen if you do. You won't just get healthier. You will begin to see the world in fundamentally different ways.

If Easter is true, then anything is possible. If Easter is true, then we can believe that ancient cathedrals will rise again.

If Easter is true, then we can believe that our country will rise again.

If Easter is true, then we can pull away the shrouds under which our hopes lie buried and we can know and trust that hate and death do not have the final say in what happens to us, and to the world.

So friends, on this Easter Sunday I invite you to believe this astonishingly Good News: Christ is risen!

Now, one more time, and join me in the refrain: Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!