

To Go in the Dark

April 7, 2024 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

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Texts: John 20:19-31

Please, will you pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Beloveds, I can't sit up here today without remembering the joyous glow of Easter last week. The trumpet! The flowers! The children! Singing at the top of our lungs! At one point I leaned over to Dan and said, "this is lit!" And I meant it. It was full of **light**. Light streaming in through the windows, light from the choir, amen?? Light pouring out of each of your faces. I wish you could see you from up here! You are lit. Worshiping together is lit. It is a beautiful thing to behold and be part of.

And each year, we can trust that it will be lit, can't we? There's a familiarity to the rhythm of each Holy Week – the grief and despair, the emptiness of Holy Saturday, and then the joy and relief of Jesus' rising. The trust that each year, after holding it in for all of Lent, after burying our banner, we get to sing and shout and ring out HALLELUJAH as much as we want. Wantonly. Gorgeously. Enthusiastically. Truly, I left church and almost shouted it to a passerby last Sunday.

That trustworthy Holy Week rhythm has been deeply comforting to me in my own lowest moments. It reminds me to trust the process, to see what the next day brings, to stay willing to be surprised by this world and by what God can do in it. I trust that I can go deeply into the darkness of Good Friday because I can trust in the light of Easter to come a couple of days later. I won't be swallowed up by grief. And at the end, I'll be reminded that love is always stronger than death or violence.

In our Gospel story this morning, we meet the disciples in a very different kind of Easter moment. They haven't lived two thousand years of Holy Weeks to know the rhythm of it by heart. The trauma of Jesus' death is fresh for them. They are behind locked doors because they fear the same crowd that crucified Jesus, and they know that as his followers they are vulnerable in this moment. They have lost their Messiah, and their dear friend, in an unimaginably cruel, humiliating, and public way. I can imagine that it feels to them as if all the light has gone out of the world.

And then, they feel, sense, see, hear Jesus in the room with them. This part of the story always breaks my heart open a little, because Jesus' words, "peace be with you" are so tender, so full of compassion for the horror the disciples have just lived through. They are the words of a loved one blessing us, wishing the best for us, seeing us in fear and doubt and confusion and longing for peace for us. Can you feel the awe and relief the disciples must have felt in that moment? Their beloved teacher and friend, whom they had last seen alive bleeding on the cross and begging for something to drink, here in the room with them, breathing the peace of the Holy Spirit onto them.

Thomas isn't there with them for that first encounter, and when he hears what they have experienced, he really isn't sure. He wants receipts. I can imagine him looking sideways at his friends and wondering whether they were losing their minds, whether their grief and trauma were making them imagine things.

He wants to be able to touch, to know. “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.”

Honestly, if I put myself in that locked room with those disciples, the memory and threat of violence vibrating in the air outside, chances are my money would have been with Thomas. I deeply resonate with his desire for certainty, and not just because we share a name. How could I possibly hope for what I never would have dared imagine after the world had tilted so terribly on its axis? Hope feels too risky without assurance, without proof. There wasn't yet a Holy Week rhythm or story for Thomas and the other disciples to rely on. No wonder he wanted to see, to feel, for himself before he risked his hope.

We encounter so many Thomas moments in our lives and in our world each day, each week, each year, don't we? How can I risk bringing children into this world when I can't know whether there will be a livable climate for my grandchildren? How can we walk forward into a risky surgery that might be life-saving without knowing how it will turn out? How can I enter a difficult conversation with someone I love without the assurance that they will hear me out and understand me? How can we walk forward into this season of change as a church without knowing what will come next? Of course, we want receipts, of course we want proof, of course we want to touch and see before we risk our hope.

In sitting with this Gospel passage this week, I've been reminded of a little treasure of a book, Rebecca Solnit's *Hope in the Dark*. She wrote it at the beginning of the US attack on Iraq, at a time of great fear and despair in this country and around the world. In that book, and I remember it to this day, she says that optimism and pessimism are the same kind of logical and spiritual fallacy. They both assume a certainty about how things will turn out. We are sure our side will win, our world will pull through climate change, the surgery will be successful; or we rest in the sad but secure certainty that this ship is going down, that our country will unravel into totalitarianism, that there is no cure. If we expect the worst, we don't have to get disappointed.

But here's the thing that Solnit says about that kind of certainty: it leads to complacency. If we imagine that we can rest in certainty, there's no room for God to work, and no room for us to partner with God through our actions.

Hope, Solnit says, exists in the **fertile dark**, in the mysterious space between those two poles. We don't know how this is all going to turn out.

We can't know how that surgery will go. We don't get to see, fully, whether we achieve the revolution we need to stop and heal from climate change. We don't get to see the endgame. What we have is not the false certainty of pure optimism or pessimism, but the mysterious, emergent hope that exists beyond where we can see, that exists in the dark. What we have are the ways we can take action, in partner dance with God, to shift our world. **God is in the fertile dark.**

I know for me, when I have Thomas moments of desiring certainty, of needing to see and touch to be able to trust, I am coming from a place of fear. I'm afraid of what's beyond my knowing, what's beyond the beam of the flashlight of my consciousness. I'm afraid of the dark, and I feel far from my faith.

When I was a kid, my grandfather, whom I call Grandy and who is here with us today, would take me and my sister and my cousins on night walks. My grandparents lived above a beautiful hillside that sloped down to a stream, and my cousins and I would occasionally spend the night at their house to give our parents a much-needed break. The night was darker at their house than I was used to in the city, and as bedtime approached, the night cacophony would begin – crickets and frogs and wind through leaves and also a silence that terrified me.

Starting when we were young, probably about 5 or 7, Grandy began the project of helping us get to know the darkness. First, we started by opening the screen door in the kitchen and listening to the sounds. The next week, we stepped out on the porch and let our eyes adjust to the night. A few weeks later, we dared to walk down the steps and onto the grass, letting the night settle around us. By the end of the summer, with Grandy’s steady presence, we grew the courage to walk all the way down the winding steps that led down to the stream. We didn’t carry flashlights. It was dark the whole way. But the night had become our friend – still mysterious, but less scary. Full of life that we couldn’t see but that we could hear, and of which we were now a part. We were finding our way in the dark, together.

It wasn’t until years later that I came across this poem from Wendell Berry and felt that he must have been along for those night walks. He writes:

*To go in the dark with a light is to know the light.
To know the dark, go dark, go without sight.
And find that the dark, too, blooms and sings
And is traveled by dark feet and dark wings.*

In our Gospel story today, Jesus’ resurrection is in that blooming, singing dark. It is a mystery that the flashlight beam of certainty and knowledge would only diminish. I have so much compassion for – and resonance with – Thomas’s desire for certainty, and for the trauma from which it arose. When Jesus says, “blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” I don’t hear it as finger-wagging against Thomas, but rather as a reminder and an invitation **that God is in the fertile darkness that blooms and sings beyond the light of our certainty**. It’s in that fertile darkness of uncertainty, of hope, that we meet God, and it’s there where God is always doing a new thing with our partnership.

Tomorrow, if the clouds collaborate, we will witness a partial solar eclipse. And I know there are some astronomy nerds and thrill-seekers among us who will brave the traffic to go to see the totality.

This week, especially sitting with this Gospel story, I’ve been thinking about the first people to witness an eclipse. About how that must have been, to have the light and color sucked out of the world, the birds start to go about their nighttime routines in the middle of the day. About how, if they’d never witnessed it before, they probably didn’t feel any assurance that the sun was going to return, that our generous source of life and color and warmth would be back to continue to bless us. Standing in the literal dark of the eclipse, maybe they also found themselves in the fertile spiritual dark of uncertainty. Maybe, like Thomas, they found themselves terrified and wanting reassurance, the world having split at the seams.

I hope, as with Thomas, that those early eclipse watchers weren’t alone. I hope that they held each other in that terrifying darkness full of possibilities. I hope they heard it bloom and sing around them even as

they waited for what was to happen next. And I hope that, just as in this Gospel story and in our community, as some were caught in doubt and terror and a desire for certainty, others were able to hold a faith in that fertile darkness.

Thomas's doubt, his longing for certainty, belongs in community. It's not on him to keep faith or hope in the dark alone, just as it's not on any one of us. Thomas had a community of Jesus' other disciples around him, and we have this community around us. There is a season for each of us to be pulled into our fear and desire for certainty, to walk through the dark with a light, to need to touch Jesus' side to believe. Because we're together, we don't have to be perfect in our faith. Together, we can practice cycling out, back into the blooming and singing darkness full of the mystery of God, willing, together, to go dark, to go without light or sight, to eventually work up the courage to make our way down the hillside together, among the crickets and the frogs and all the unseen beings, and to meet God there in the dark, in that fertile space where our just, loving, and courageous actions can partner with God to reshape the world.

Amen.

Benediction:

Beloveds, as you go from this place today, may God bloom and sing in the dark around you, and may God make their face to shine upon you like a bright and warm sun. May you hold each other through the fertile dark, and may God meet you there and bless you. Go in peace.

