

# A Sermon for DaySpring

By Burt L. Burleson

**“Still Dark”**

**John 20: 1-18**

**April 11, 2004**

John begins his story of Easter morning with the simple words, **“While it was still dark.”** Most folks figure he had a copy of Matthew and Mark in front of him. John was the last to go to press.

And so, he reads Matthew’s account, which says, **“At dawn...”** and he takes note of Mark who says, **“after sunrise,”** and he leans back to ponder and remember and he thinks of all he’s known in the years since that great morning... all he knows... all that is...

Then John picks up his quill and dips it in the ink and on the last page of papyrus writes, **“While it was still dark.”**

And surely he was thinking of all his students...  
his disciples...

those he’d been teaching for years.

He was thinking about them because he circled back to one of his old themes... Light and dark. He’d used it over and over... It’s all through his gospel.

In the first paragraph, conjuring up Genesis for any Jew he writes, **“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”**

He remembers and records words of Jesus, like...

**“This is the verdict... light has come into the world.”**

**“I am the light of the world.”**

**“If you walk by the night you’ll stumble.**

**“Walk in the light while you have it.”**

It’s everywhere.... In the stories he tells.

About Nicodemus who comes to Jesus... at night.

And about a man born blind, who starts seeing.

And folks who can see but who are really “blind.”

And he makes a point of saying after Judas leaves the room to betray Jesus... **“It was night.”**

So he starts his Easter story this way, knowing all his young seminarians will get all excited about it... maybe write some paper or some obnoxiously long dissertation on John’s use of light and darkness... day and night.

He’s thinking about those students, some, when he picks up that quill... but mostly he’s thinking about the people he pastors. And what they’re going through.

He had a young lady get with him earlier in the week for counseling... she can’t get pregnant... and she’s so sad... and she’s tempted to feel all the shame and guilt that culture can unload on her.

And as he picks up his quill he’s thinking about that family man, the local potter who’d just become a Christian and whose business is drying up because of it.

He’s thinking about the grandmother in his flock, whose granddaughter has become a prostitute and just seems to be out of her mind and out of control.

He's remembering the funeral he did and how real the grief was for the young widower who, too early, lost his wife... and his dreams.

It'd been a long time since that first Easter morning.

And while the movement had grown... it was taking it on the chin and then some. So when he picked up his quill and bent over to write his story, he was thinking about how they still had to draw the curtains when they worshipped.

He was thinking about the war he was hearing about constantly.  
 The famine in full swing down south.  
 The building that had collapsed near the market.

He was thinking some about the conflict the church had gone through the year before. It was so... frustrating... that even though everyone in the church followed and loved Jesus, coming together seemed so impossible.

When it was time to tell Easter's story, John was remembering that day and the glory of it... but he was also remembering this day and the difficulty of it. And so he picked up his pen and he wrote... **"While it was still dark."**

Because it is... it's still dark. The light has shined in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it... but the darkness is still with us. And on Easter we should say that... maybe say it first, like John did.

There's a reason we leave the black cloth in the room... It sort of lurks around even after the lilies have been brought in.

Easter is here...

Jesus has risen...

but in some ways

and in some places

and in our hearts on some days,

It's still dark... and we say that this morning... especially for those whose Hallelujah this morning was... tentative.

Maybe you read the papers this morning and were reminded before you came to sing here on Easter Sunday that it's still dark.

Some of you woke up with huge questions ringing inside you and they're large enough questions to compete with any Easter Bells.

Doubts can make things dark, can't they Thomas?

Of course, life being life and humanity being humanity is why we have to say, even on Easter, **"It's still dark."** It's dark and we all keep bumping into one another, don't we.

In families... communities... culture. It's still dark.

Like it was for Jesus' friends on Resurrection day. Jesus was alive but it was still dark.

It began for Mary Magdalene in the dark. She is overwhelmed by grief... her heart wasn't just broken, it was gone. She didn't sleep the night before... There were no sleeping aids back then for those who'd lost loved-ones.

Jesus' disciples... Peter and John, maybe they slept but they woke up to a world that had misplaced its meaning. They woke up wondering if anything would matter anymore.

For all three of them... it's dark... and then Easter happens to them. In different ways, but it happens. I'm glad for that... the light beaks in on me differently than it does on you and that's okay.

John... sees an empty tomb and believes. Just like that, connections take place in head and heart... he remembers and he gets it... in a moment, the light shines.

We don't know what Peter's experiencing... the story doesn't say. But it implies... that he sees but... he doesn't see. It's like this is going to take Peter a little time... The light dawns slowly on him... He'll eventually wake up to it... but not right off. On the first day, he sees and walks away.

Mary, sees and makes no connections. She sees angels and hears them, still not getting what has taken place. She even sees Jesus... It's not until she hears her name. It's intimate.

Her name,

said the way he said it,

knowing her the way he knew her.

That's the real Easter moment for Mary. Now, the light is shining into her darkness.

And that's what we say "amen" to on Easter. That's what our Hallelujah is all about. It's still dark but it's not just dark... The light shines as well.

And that's the faith we share today. Not simply some doctrine we confess about what happen on a morning 2000 years ago... But we proclaim the "here and there in the world and now and then in ourselves" (Tillich) there is light in our darkness. Dark as it may be... the darkness is not overcoming this light that is shining.

If you're here this morning and can't say that with gusto... it's okay... let us say it for you. Join in and say it with us, hoping... knowing that on another Easter you'll be able to say it without stuttering. For now... we'll say it for you.

There'll come a day, when my hallelujah will be weak, when my world will have grown dark, and I'll need your confirmation of this. For now, we'll say it for you...

**Jesus is risen. This is the day that the Lord has made...** that's what we're confirming.  
**The Lord has made this day, let us be glad and rejoice in it.**

It's such a familiar Psalm and lots of us use it when we wake up, thinking of the new day we've been given.

But probably the Hebrew poet was thinking more in terms of a new reality... a realm... that God had ushered in. Like you and I would say of a particular time in our history... **"This really is a new day."** Meaning... new reality, world, rules, etc. A new way of operating.

**"You think the world is this way... it's really not... it's this way."**

The Psalmist wrote it thinking about God's great act of deliverance at Passover and the Church has said always (via the Lectionary)... **"Read this on Easter."**

So as Christians when we say **"This is the day that the Lord has made..."** we are saying there is another reality we live by... it is light, not darkness. Life... not death.

Easter is the day when God declares what is... death doesn't win... darkness isn't ultimate. Like God is saying to us, **"I know it's hard for you to say, just now, let me say it for you. In Christ, I'm saying it for you... the darkness will not over come the light."**

So, as wake up to another 24 hour day, we wake up to another DAY. When we roll out of bed and into our lives ... even if it's still dark... we can rejoice and be glad because there is another reality we know. There's another day made by the God of life and it calls for gladness.

I ran across this poem by W.S. Merwin. I have no idea if he or she is in church today... but I like the poem.

*Listen*

*with the night falling we are saying thank you  
we are stopping on the bridge to bow from the railings  
we are running out of the glass rooms  
with our mouths full of food to look at the sky  
and say thank you  
we are standing by the water looking out  
in different directions*

*back from a series of hospitals back from a mugging  
after funerals we are saying thank you  
after the news of the dead  
whether or not we knew them we are saying thank you  
in a culture up to its chin in shame  
living in the stench it has chosen we are saying thank you*

*over telephones we are saying thank you  
in doorways and in the backs of cars and in elevators  
remembering wars ... and the beatings on the stairs we are saying thank you*

*with... our lost feelings we are saying thank you  
with the words going out like cells of a brain  
with the cities growing over us like the earth  
we are saying thank you faster and faster  
with nobody listening we are saying thank you  
we are saying thank you and waving  
dark though it is.*

*W.S. Merwin*

O God of life, can you hear us? We are saying “thank you.” For your son Jesus who led the way in victory over death, the One whom we follow who is the light shining in our darkness. We are saying “thank you” for resurrection life that is coursing through our world unimpeded by our brokenness... unparalleled in power and goodness and joy. We are saying thank you for the thousand empty tombs that we’ll encounter even today. We are saying thank you. We are saying thank you for this new day in which we find ourselves by grace. Hear us, O God. Hear our eternal thank you. Amen.

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