

The Dawn of the First Day

In the name of our risen Lord and Savior, dear friends in Christ: I wonder if anyone here has ever experienced total darkness. It's actually pretty hard to find. Even in the darkest places, there's usually a little light coming from someplace. The closest thing I've come to it is when visiting Jewel Cave, a National Monument near the border between Wyoming and South Dakota. From the visitor's center they put you in an elevator and drop you some 750 feet straight down. Even then, you're still at one of the upper levels of the cave – it's huge and incredibly complex, like an intricate 3-dimensional maze. Anyway, when you step out of the elevator, you are at a place many miles away from the mouth of the cave, which is the only source of natural light, so you know none of it is reaching where you are. And then, just to give you a feel for it, they turn off all the artificial lights down there. You find yourself in a total blackness that's hard to describe. It's oppressive and disorienting. After letting you experience it for a couple minutes, they turn the lights back on. It's at that point they allow anyone who wants to return to the elevator and go back up to the visitor's center without doing the rest of the hour-long tour. No surprise here: they usually have some takers on the offer. Total darkness is a scary thing.

The Saturday or Sabbath of Holy Week, the full day in which Jesus was buried and rested in the tomb, was an entire day of total darkness. Oh, I'm sure the sun came up and shone as normal; but I'm speaking of spiritual darkness. He who is the Light of the World had been snuffed out. And no one believed in him. Not a single living soul on the face of the earth. His enemies, blind to the truth and unable to see due to their internal darkness, thought they had their rejection of him confirmed. They were smugly pleased to be in the dark. And his former followers, those who had believed in him, were in shock and fear. They had been so sure about him. They had thought that he was the Christ, the one who was to redeem Israel. And though he had several times tried to explain to them that his messianic mission included being rejected by the elders, sentenced to death, and crucified, somehow it never sunk in. So when it happened, they didn't see it coming. I guess you could say they were "blindsided" because it came from a truth to which they were blind. In that sense, *they* had been in the dark.

But the long period between sunset on Friday when Jesus was placed in the tomb, all through the next day and night – that must have been the worst. Their faith in Jesus had been shattered. The foundation of everything they thought and understood had collapsed. They were lost. "How could we have been so deceived? And what now? What are we supposed to believe? What are we supposed to do? We had staked our futures, all our hopes and dreams on Jesus. And now he's gone. What's next?" In a spiritual sense they were groping around in the dark, trying to make sense of any of it; and failing miserably. This is what I mean when I say it was a time of total darkness.

It recalls a former time of total darkness mentioned in the Scripture. It was at the very beginning when God created the heaven and the earth. (Yes, some of you knew I couldn't resist going all Genesis on you.) But remember how the earth is described then. It was chaotic, empty, *and darkness covered the face of the earth*. Total darkness. Light hadn't even been created yet. But it sounds a lot like Holy Saturday. It sounds a lot like the condition of the confused and disillusioned disciples of Jesus holed up together in a locked room for fear of the Jews.

But back to creation: it started in the dark, and so it would have remained. But it didn't. God began to speak his powerful Word to his creation – the powerful Word through which he reveals himself and he changes the creation. He improves it with every Word he speaks. Through his Word he moves the creation from dark to light, from chaos to order, and from death to life. And it's no coincidence that the first Word he speaks is, "Let there be light."

Why? It's because the Word of God is a title of the Son of God. He's the person of the Holy Trinity through whom God always operates in the world. And he is the Light of the World. So, if you'll allow me, what's really happening there in God's first creative and self-revealing act is that the Father is saying to the Son, "Shine, Jesus, shine." And God saw that the light was good. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

And now in today's text, we see it happening again. It's the dawn of a new first day. Mary Magdalene and one St. Matthew identifies as "the other Mary" have journeyed in the dark (both physically and spiritually) to the tomb where Jesus was laid. Just as the day is breaking and the light begins to shine they arrive to find the tomb opened. An angel of the Lord whose appearance is like lightening (of all things) sits atop the stone that he's rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. The angel shines so brightly the women can barely stand to look directly at him – that's the way lightening is. Ah, but what he says is even more illuminating. It's a word that shines in their dark souls. "Do not be afraid. For I know you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead ..."

The angel announces the rising of the Son (S-O-N), he who is the Light of the World. He does it on the first day of the new creation. I can imagine the women peering into the formerly dark tomb, now full of light shining forth from the bright angel. Sure enough: there's no body in there. The light's beginning to dawn on them. They turn around and go quickly, filled with holy awe and great joy. And then they soon encounter the Light himself. They fall down at his feet and worship him. He directs them to go and share the Light, to rescue others from total darkness.

Dear friends, our celebration of Easter is about the light of Christ beginning to shine again and spreading forth over the face of the earth on the first day of the new creation. That Light shines in our darkness even now. And with every Word he speaks he illumines us. He moves us from dark to light, from chaos to order, and from death to life.

And he promises to do it again on a grander scale. Unless Christ returns first, the time is coming when all of us will be in total darkness. Your mortal remains will rest in a tomb buried in the earth. No light coming in. Total darkness. But as sure as Christ's tomb was opened, yours will be opened too. At his Word your body will be raised like his, incorruptible. And with holy awe and great joy you will enter the light of the endless day. And together we will fall at his feet and worship him. This is his sure promise. This is our certain hope.

Thus, we sing: Awake, my heart with gladness, see what today is done; now, after gloom and sadness, comes forth the glorious sun!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!