

# *Deep Dawn*

by

The Reverend Dr. Agnes W. Norfleet  
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

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Luke 23:50-24:12

<sup>50</sup>Now there was a good and righteous man named Joseph, who, though a member of the council, <sup>51</sup>had not agreed to their plan and action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea, and he was waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God. <sup>52</sup>This man went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. <sup>53</sup>Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid. <sup>54</sup>It was the day of Preparation, and the sabbath was beginning. <sup>55</sup>The women who had come with him from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid. <sup>56</sup>Then they returned, and prepared spices and ointments. On the sabbath they rested according to the commandment.

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. <sup>2</sup>They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, <sup>3</sup>but when they went in, they did not find the body. <sup>4</sup>While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling

clothes stood beside them. <sup>5</sup>The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. <sup>6</sup>Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, <sup>7</sup>that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.” <sup>8</sup>Then they remembered his words, <sup>9</sup>and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. <sup>10</sup>Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.

<sup>11</sup>But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. <sup>12</sup>But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

<sup>1</sup>O give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!

<sup>2</sup>Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.”

<sup>14</sup>The LORD is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.

<sup>15</sup>There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the LORD does valiantly;

<sup>16</sup>the right hand of the LORD is exalted; the right hand of the LORD does valiantly.”

<sup>17</sup>I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the LORD.

<sup>18</sup>The LORD has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death.

<sup>19</sup>Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the LORD.

<sup>20</sup>This is the gate of the LORD; the righteous shall enter through it.

<sup>21</sup>I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation.

<sup>22</sup>The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.

<sup>23</sup>This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

<sup>24</sup>This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

When someone dies it is frequently the small things that evoke the big and lasting memories, little exchanges never forgotten that become imbued with significance over the years. When I sit with people who have lost loved ones, and we talk about meaningful ways to remember them in a Memorial Service, it's rarely the big things - the vocation, or major accomplishment that come to the fore. It's the small things: the spirit of hospitality, the distinct expressions of kindness, the little acts of love, a turn of phrase oft repeated, or a particular reaction to some key family event, the listening ear in that time of need, the forgiveness offered at that one moment which brought healing to the crisis. It's so often the small things remembered and treasured as time goes by that give meaning to the memory of love and relationship.

I've heard grieving people tell of catching a scent wafting from a kitchen door that reminds them of their mother's baking. A colloquial saying a grandfather used so often that long after he's gone just hearing those words summons his presence into the room. A solitary interchange between loved ones remembered from way back that still has the power to conjure up raw emotion. It's often the small things that memory hangs on to which reveal some palpable truth in the present.

These days, for example, I carry with me a lovely memory of being in Ukraine that I know intensifies my anger, grief and sadness over the war there. I was in my mid-twenties, a seminary student on a trip to the Soviet Union with a group from the National Council of Churches. We flew from Moscow to Odessa for a few days and what I remember about Odessa is that outside of Paris perhaps, it was the most beautiful city I'd ever seen. Of course, it's not the loss of beauty that grieves me now; it's the loss of life. But I know that forty-year old little memory of walking up the city's esplanade from the sea to the Opera House, intensifies my anguish over this war. Sometimes it is a very small thing that arises in our remembering to summon emotion and to deepen meaning.

Preachers are grateful for the four different gospel accounts of the resurrection, and I am particularly thankful that it's Luke's turn to tell us the Easter story. Because Luke says one little thing that the other gospels do not say which I think resonates deeply with our need for the good news of Easter this year. Sandwiched in between the burial of Jesus and the women discovering the tomb empty on the third day, Luke says something worth noting, particularly on this first Easter of our being together in three full years. The Easter proclamation in Luke's gospel begins: *But on the first day of the week, at early dawn...*

Biblical scholars suggest a better translation of "*early dawn*" is "deep dawn." The unfolding news of resurrection begins in haze and mist when it's still darker than light. The gospel of John says Mary came early; Matthew says it was toward dawn. Mark says it was very early, but only Luke says in deep dawn the women came to the tomb. Deep dawn is suggestive of how imperceptible the first encounter with resurrection must have been, a particularly engaging way to nuance this wondrous thing that has come to pass. We talk about the break of dawn, but dawn does not actually break as in a flash; it doesn't even really crack.

My preacher friend and longtime chaplain at Williams College, Rick Spalding described it this way: "It isn't as if the light pushes back the darkness at a line of scrimmage; it's as though the night microscopically begins to turn itself inside out revealing some startling new side of its nature one atom at a time. Light and darkness spend each dawn yearning for each other, greeting each other, reaching into each other's essence. I suspect," Rick goes on, "that most people approach Easter through something like *deep dawn* – that time when you cannot be absolutely sure yet what you are seeing."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Spalding, unpublished paper for Moveable Feast preaching seminar, 1997.

In the dark, all you perceive is the promise of light. I don't know how to say it any better than Luke does with those two small words. If there were ever a time to arrive at Easter in the darkness of deep dawn, it has to be this year. It's been a long, tragic, almost unbearably sad and grief-filled two years. Just this week, the news: "Propelled by COVID, U. S. Deaths Hit Record – the number of fatalities at all-time high." 2021 was the deadliest year in the history of this country – when the usual number of deaths were piled on by Covid, drug overdoses, and gun violence. <sup>2</sup> Two hundred thousand children in our country have lost a parent to Covid. <sup>3</sup>

The last two years have tried to rob us of so many little aspects of life – casting fear over our regular comings and goings, separating us from one another in so many ways. We have seen the *deep dawn* of grief; of war; of utter meanness and revolting displays of incivility, of racism and intolerance. It's been a long two years. Deep dawn can also be that place of personal fear and longing – when the doctor comes in with bad news; when the job ends unexpectedly; when depression looms like a cloud; when family or friends turn hurtful.

These two little words so aptly describe our coming to Easter, that I'm sure walking through deep dawn is why Luke's disciples – approach the news of resurrection gradually, ineffably, turning one memory at a time over so as to reveal very slowly the startling newness of our nature in Christ. The women, we are told, were perplexed; the disciples dismissive of what the women came to understand. Peter had to run back to see for himself. If you are one of those believers who is afraid to claim too much certainty about resurrection, you are in good company in the murky morning confusion of these first witnesses. Luke's gospel story is so artfully crafted that it mirrors the human experience of faith

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<sup>2</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "COVID-19, overdoses pushed US to highest death total ever," April 12, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, April 13, 2022.

gradually coming to understanding. Resurrection faith is walking through the darkness of deep dawn, and hoping against hope for the light to unfold revealing new life.

I don't often re-read novels, but I revisited one during the latter season of the pandemic shut-down. I had read Amor Towles' *A Gentleman in Moscow* when it first came out five or six years ago while I was on vacation, coming and going freely, enjoying travel and time with family and friends. But as the pandemic wore on I picked it up again to remember how Count Alexander Rostov made such a life for himself all the while imprisoned in a hotel for long years. The main character of the book is a Russian count who is placed under house arrest in a grand hotel in the center of Moscow after the Bolsheviks come to power. At his trial he is told that if he ever sets foot outside he will be shot to death in the street. He's given a small upper floor room, and although he lives all of his days inside the hotel, the count nevertheless has a life of adventure. His days are touched by tragedy and loss, romance and friendship, joy and longing.

At one point the book describes the count procuring hard-to-find ingredients to cook a fragrant bouillabaisse for two of his closest friends. Dining together, they tell stories, and juggle oranges, and laugh until the wee hours. After this luminous meal, the count reflects on Life and Death saying, "Since the beginning of storytelling, Death has called on the unwitting. In one tale or another, Death arrives quietly in town and takes a room at an inn, or lurks in an alleyway, or lingers in the marketplace, surreptitiously. Then just when the hero has a moment of respite from his daily affairs, Death pays him a visit. This is all well and good. But what is rarely relayed is the fact that life is every bit as devious as Death. It too can wear a hooded coat. Life too can slip into town, lurk in an alley, or wait in the back of a tavern." <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Amor Towles, *A Gentleman in Moscow*, and thanks to the plot summary from Scott Black Johnston's sermon, What Do We Know about Life? 4/1/18, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian, NYC.

Friends, in the darkness and difficulty of these last couple of years, we can be assured that while the death tolls have been mounting, life too has been slipping into town, lurking in the alleys, waiting for us to remember life is always there. For his followers and friends, when Jesus was crucified, so much of the hope they had for a better day and a brighter tomorrow had died and was buried with him. So many of their beliefs about the justice of God and the triumph of right over wrong and Good over evil seemed to hang in limbo. But, Luke says, during that time of fear and uncertainty, of heartache and grief, while it was yet still dark, in deep dawn life triumphed over death. Life became the primary character always lingering in the shadows. By the power of God, the Life of Jesus Christ, the life of resurrection was unleashed throughout the world.

When the women could barely make out what they were seeing, angels in dazzling white appeared, directing them out and away from the tomb into the full light of God's power to give life. The angels said: *Remember*. And they began to remember the small things that Jesus did and said: How he took little children into his arms; how he ate meals with despised people; how he healed people with a touch and a word. They remembered the little things he said: *Blessed are the poor for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; Do unto others as you would have them do unto you; Forgive and you will be forgiven*; They remembered how on the far end of their most serious questions about life Jesus said, Once upon a time... and he told stories of seeds and lost sheep, of building houses and storing up treasures, of someone helping another in a ditch; of grand dinner parties.

It's the small things that make up a life, the daily witnesses to resurrection enacted through the living of our days. And when the night is long, and the dawn is deep, we remember the one thing Jesus said to help us make sense of all the rest: the Son of God must be handed over, crucified, and on the third day will rise again.

The women remembered his words. We remember his words, and go forth to live with the hope and the faith that no darkness, no matter how deep, can hold back the dawn. No death can extinguish the Light of Life.

AMEN.