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SEEING (AND BELIEVING) IN THE DARK
John 20:1-18; Easter Vigil; March 30, 2024

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Traditionally, the Vigil of Easter Service is held later in the evening, toward midnight or even in the pre-dawn hours. The Church gathers in the dark, waiting for Easter's dawn like the first disciples did. But unlike their gloom of death, we joyfully wait with the full knowledge of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The first disciples waited in the dark for the Sabbath to end so they could work at embalming the body of Jesus still thought to be dead. We enter this night before Easter with the full knowledge and hope of the resurrection. Because Jesus has risen from the dead, we will be raised when He returns in glory.

So the symbolism of us worshipping in the dark is not because Jesus is dead, and we are waiting for Him to rise. Jesus lives and will raise us from the darkness of death to live with Him forever. To confess this, the Church may gather at the cemetery in Easter's pre-dawn light. The word "cemetery" comes from the Greek word for "sleep" or "rest." The bodies of faithfully departed brothers and sisters in Christ are resting or sleeping in the cemetery until He comes to awaken them. Looking to the east and seeing the sun rise on Easter morning, we are reminded that the "sunrise from on high" will shine His light upon us, the light no darkness can overcome.

The darkness during this time of worship also reminds us of what our world is still like. We live in a dark world, one where we continue to struggle against sin, needing to drown the Old Adam in us daily by contrition, sorrow for our sins, and repentance, faith that God forgives our sins for Jesus' sake. This world is still the dark valley of the shadow of death that all of us travel through until we die.

At times, it feels like the darkness has overcome the light in our lives. It can feel like there is only darkness in us and all around us. We look around for signs of light and life and we see none. Looking into the darkness of our hearts and lives without seeing any light can lead us to dread what lurks in the darkness seeking to overcome us.

The way God created eyes is with clear lenses through which light enters and is focused on sensors in the back: rods and cones, if I remember by freshman biology correctly. Our eyes must have light in order to see anything. As I age and my lenses yellow and become cloudy on the way to cataracts, I need stronger light to see and read. When driving my car at night, my vision is not as good as it once was. When I peer into the darkness, I find it harder to make out what's ahead. Is that a deer waiting in the ditch that will jump in front of me, or just the shadow of a bush? It's hard to see clearly in faint light.

We heard a little while ago the account from John 20, which begins in the darkness of predawn Easter. **Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark.** This set off a chain of events of others coming to Jesus' tomb. **Mary saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb.** In the darkness, what Mary saw led her to believe that Jesus' dead body had been stolen from its resting place. She saw the stone was rolled away, but she did not see Jesus. **So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple.**

This report brought Peter and John running to the tomb. John outran Peter and, **stooping, he saw (βλέπει) the linen cloths lying there, but did not go in.** Then Peter arrived and **went into the tomb. He saw (θεωρεῖ) the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw (εἶδεν) and believed.**

This account uses three different Greek words for “seeing.” This could be just a writer trying not to be repetitive by using a variety of words that describe “seeing,” but in the context of the Easter account of the morning light getting stronger as the sun was rising, and their ability to see more clearly in the brightening daylight, this seems to me to be more than just writing style.

Mary saw something in the dark. John stops outside the tomb and “sees” in the dim light of day. Peter goes into the tomb and makes a careful observation (John uses here the word for “seeing,” as an observation, or close paying attention to something; the root of our

word for theater). Then John came in and “saw” everything and was able to interpret what he saw: Jesus’ body had not been stolen, but He had indeed risen from the dead. **He saw and believed.** Later on, Mary Magdalene would come back to the tomb in the full daylight of morning, “observe” (θεωρεῖ) some angels and then “observe” Jesus without recognizing Him. She supposed He was the gardener, who might have taken Jesus’ body away, or know where it was taken.

What did it take for Mary to believe that Jesus was alive? **Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to Him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher) ... Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen (ἑώρακα) the Lord.”** It took Jesus speaking to Mary, calling her by name, for her to recognize Him in faith. The sheep of the Good Shepherd recognize His voice and follow Him where He leads. The Good Shepherd goes before His sheep through the valley of the shadow of death to life, rising from the dead to lead us through death to life.

Believing in Jesus is not a matter of seeing in the dark with our physical eyes but hearing the Word with our ears and believing. The Evangelist John admitted that he saw clearly in the daylight what Jesus’ empty tomb meant but had to admit: **for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead.** Faith in Jesus comes not by seeing, but by hearing the Word of Christ. It was necessary that Jesus’ disciples see Him alive on Easter and during the 40 days afterwards so they could give their eyewitness accounts of His resurrection, but our faith in Jesus comes from hearing God’s Word in Christ that they recorded for us in Scripture.

As this service has progressed, it has actually gotten darker outside as it got lighter inside. The world we live in is dark. Our lives are darkened by our sin and the sins committed against us. We are facing the darkness of death both for ourselves and for our loved ones. The Light of Jesus breaks into this darkness, bringing us into His light. God’s Word shatters the darkness and creates in us the light of faith in Jesus, who forgives our sins and saves us from death. God’s **Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path** (Ps 119:106). The Light of the living Christ **shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.** By faith in Jesus, we see in the dark. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **He is risen, indeed! Alleluia.**