

Charles R. Blaisdell, Senior Pastor  
First Christian Church  
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## Subtle Sunrise

(Mark 15:43-47; 16:1-7) Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself waiting expectantly for the kingdom of God, went boldly to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. 44 Then Pilate wondered if he were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether he had been dead for some time. 45 When he learned from the centurion that he was dead, he granted the body to Joseph. 46 Then Joseph bought a linen cloth, and taking down the body, wrapped it in the linen cloth, and laid it in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock. He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. 47 Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid. 16:1 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, as the sun was rising, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. See the place where he had laid. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

When I was in college, some of my friends and I decided to take a trip during spring break to Chicago. Now, it's almost 1000 miles from Ft. Worth, Texas, to Chicago, and the wise way to have made such a trip would have been to stop at some point and get a few hours of real sleep. But since we had more energy than smarts, we didn't do the wise thing, but instead we took off from campus one afternoon, switching drivers back and forth, and drove without stopping until noon the next day. It wasn't quite the joyride that we thought it was going to be, and, in fact, before too many hours had passed we ended up having one of those stupid arguments – I don't even recall

what it was about – among friends, where mean things get said. I still wince when I remember it.

But one of the other memories I have from that trip, though, will also always remain with me because it was so absolutely startling – and so absolutely disconcerting. During one of my shifts driving, I had driven until about 4:00 a.m., and then turned the wheel over to someone else while I took a not-very-satisfying nap – which was full of strange dreams and road noises and snippets of the argument that got weirdly incorporated into those dreams. Anyway, about 6:30 or so, I woke up – and was utterly disoriented and disconcerted. For what I saw, looking out that car window was the sun smack dab on the horizon, framed by low blue and purple clouds there above the Midwest prairie. And yet I was still sleep-benumbed and I could not remember whether this was sunrise or sunset, dawn or dusk. Struggling to come awake, I tried very hard to think – “Where am I? Is it morning or night?” Is the sun going up or down? In that moment I just didn’t know!

Now, of course, in a moment or two, I did remember why I was sitting there in that cramped car, speeding over the plains, hungry, thirsty, a little raw from the argument we had had, with the taste of old coffee in my mouth and needing a restroom – oh yeah, I’m having fun! And so as I woke up and got re-oriented, I also noticed one other thing that left me in awe: the absolute beauty of the land and the sky, the amazing and subtle contrast and play of colors and textures. The subtle light of the just-risen sun gave things a gentle and powerful beauty that the noonday or afternoon sun just doesn’t do – because at high noon or mid-afternoon the sun is too bright; everything gets a little bleached-looking, a little washed-out. But that sun at dawn let everything

come through – the colors, the shades, the textures – all of it was there to behold in its glorious subtle wonderful beauty.

There IS something subtle about the gentle light of dawn that can allow us to see things that we couldn't or maybe would be unwilling to see by a more direct light, that can allow us to be more honest with ourselves. And so by the gentle and subtle light of that sunrise, my friends and I were able to talk honestly about some of the angry things that we had said to one another, things that we all now regretted, things that we wished we hadn't said. And I am convinced that it was that subtle and more gentle light of dawn that helped make that possible; for it's harder to be honest, it's harder to not get defensive, by the glare of the noontime's harsher light. In the full light of day, or even in the shadows of the night, it seems, sometimes, that we find it easier to say things that we don't mean and do things we didn't intend.

And, likewise, if we insist on looking at the Easter story in too harsh of a light, we can easily end up turning it into a magic show or we can focus so hard on the details of the story that we forget to ask the question, "*What does this have to do with me?*" So what *does* the story of the first Easter morning have to do with you and with me? Well, it has always intrigued me that the very first words in every single one of the gospel stories about Easter morning, the very first words addressed to those who had followed Jesus, who had cared for him in his earthly life and stood there in grief at the foot of the cross during his earthly death – the very first words are these: "*Do not be afraid.*" Do not be afraid. Not such striking and bright-as-day words like "celebrate," or "dance," or "sing," or "shout" – but the more gentle and quiet words "Do not be afraid." For you see, by dawn's subtle and gentle-but-honest light, you and I do know that we have

sometimes had reason to be afraid, haven't we? For we have all sinned. We have all had those stupid fights in the night. We have all sometimes worked at cross-purposes with God's will for this world. We have all sometimes closed our ears and our eyes and our wallets to those to whom Christ came to minister. We have all sometimes drawn lines between "us" and "them," or stood by while some evil, small or large, worked its way through our corner of the world. We have all had times we have not spoken up when we should have, and times that we have shouted when we should have stayed silent. We have all been complicit in not loving Jesus as much as we wanted to, in not doing what he asked us to do.

And so, when you think about it, that first quiet word by dawn's subtle light to those first visitors to the tomb is indeed entirely appropriate: "Do not be afraid." For we cannot celebrate, we cannot sing or shout for joy, until we have faced and acknowledged our fears and even our shame. And so "Be not afraid" is exactly the right word, is it not? It is a word that both rightly acknowledges what we know about our failings – for we do have things that we did that were wrong, and we do have things that we wish we could take back and re-do. And yet the word of acknowledgment about our foibles and failings offers the way of freedom and transformation. For unless we acknowledge that the world – and we along with it – have sometimes gone astray, unless we are honestly able to acknowledge that God's purposes are sometimes thwarted by us and others, then the story of Easter morning comes too cheaply, can feel like some sort of sleight of hand that doesn't really confront us in the depths of who we are, both the good and the not-so-good.

So before the women at the tomb went to tell the disciples the astounding good news that Jesus had been raised, the angel at the tomb had a second word for them: “see the place where he had laid.” Now, that is not just another way of saying “He is Risen.” No, “see the place where he had laid” is the oh-so-honest acknowledgment that their friend and teacher and guide had truly been dead, and that that tomb bore the marks of His suffering. For even in the resurrection, the scars were not gone – the Risen Jesus yet bears the marks of the hurt inflicted on him. For God is no magician. God cannot change the past. The scars remain. And yet the scars are indispensable for knowing that this is not just a fairy tale but a story that truly speaks to our condition, for we too are ones who have been scarred by life. And sometimes, even, we have inflicted the scars. We all carry the scars of our becoming – scars of childbirth, scars of lifesaving surgery, lines of wisdom earned by years of living; scars earned by hours of both pain and love. By dawn’s soft and subtle light, we know that this is all true and even beautiful.

But that is not yet the gospel. Because that is not the end of the story. For the word that comes to those women, the word that then came to the disciples, the word that then went forth to Galilee and Jerusalem and Rome and even to Colorado Springs is not just the story of those very real scars, but it is the word: *“He is not here, He is not here.”* In those four simple words we have the Good News of Easter in a nutshell. For they tell us that God is not bound forever by evil. They tell us that the love at the heart of creation, however thwarted it can be sometimes, can and will and does overcome. They tell us that the scars of our lives are not ultimately crippling and disfiguring. And

so the message of Easter is indeed that God's love is more powerful than anything that has scarred us – and that neither illness nor frailty, nor guilt, nor remorse, nor shame, nor sin, nor even death itself can separate us that love. For “He is not here.” He is not here. The message of the resurrection, the message of Easter, is that there, by the subtle light of the dawn's new day, we are shown that the love of God present in Jesus Christ could not and cannot be finally killed, even amidst the pain and humiliation of death on a cross. The message of the resurrection is that God's love, amidst every attempt of the powers of evil or sin to crucify that love, will rise again, to love again, to create again, to transform again. “He is not here. He is risen.”

Which means, as with every story and teaching from the Bible, the message is not just about God but about us: the message about us in the subtle and wondrous light of Easter morning is that our lives can be changed where they need changing, that we can be healed where we need healing, that we can be transformed and renewed and re-made where our scars and our sins might have made us think we were forever trapped. For the good news of the Easter message is not only that God's love will never die, but that that love has the power to change our lives, to transform our brokenness, to liberate us from anything that would entomb us. For when it would seem that our past mistakes might trap us forever, God is always seeking to offer a way forward, a way out, a new way of being a renewed and even resurrected life. “He is not here. He is risen.” Or in the words of that old and oh-so-right hymn,

Morning has broken, like the first morning....  
Praise with elation, praise every morning  
God's re-creation of the new day.

He is not here. He is risen. Alleluia!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Some of the ideas and an occasional phrase in this sermon have been gratefully adapted from Edmund Steimle's sermon "Easter – Festival of Mystery" in his book God the Stranger: Reflections About Resurrection (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), pp. 5-10.