

Easter brings with it the renewal of the earth, technically only a lovely coincidence in the Northern hemisphere, with green blades rising and trees flowering. It *almost* seems like Jesus must have intended it this way. You remember how he said that a grain of wheat must fall to the earth and die in order to grow and live again. John's gospel places the resurrection in a garden, where we imagine new life springing up all around, so maybe it isn't strictly coincidental. I suspect for many of us, these outward and visible signs are a wonderful reminder of the spiritual, unseen grace that his resurrection brings.

When I was a child, one of the hallmarks of spring was the fireflies. We called them lightening bugs. They were fascinating beyond words. We went out, trying to catch them and hold on to them and figure out how exactly they lit up and turned off. They weren't easy to catch, of course, because they didn't come out until dark, and they lit up only for a second, and by the time they lit up again they were somewhere else. We ran after them and tried to hold onto their mysterious light, which frustrated as much as it delighted.

It occurs to me that this isn't a terrible metaphor of Easter, of the resurrection of Jesus, how Light once began shining in the darkness wonderfully and mysteriously. For those who believe, that Light has delighted. For those who don't believe, that Light has frustrated.

John's gospel says that it was early in the morning, that it was dark, when the women went to the tomb and found it empty. There was frustration as well as delight. There was running and searching and trying to find. There was the experience of coming up empty-handed a few times.

I suspect that this was as it ought to be. John's gospel reminds us that Jesus' entire existence had been a struggle between light and darkness, of light shining in a way that even profound darkness had not been able to overcome. And in the last week of Jesus' life, there were profound experiences of both. There was his triumphant entry into Jerusalem. *Light*. There was the murmuring and plotting of the officials about how they would get rid of him. *Darkness*. There were his friends who gathered

around him in love and fidelity, and Mary anointed his feet with perfume so expensive that even Judas was moved by it. *Light*. And then Judas went and made his fateful deal—a bag of silver for a box of nails—*darkness*. Jesus sat at the Table in an Upper Room and offered us the holy food and drink of new and unending life in him. *Light*. Then Judas departed into the night, doing quickly what he must do. *Darkness*. There was the betrayal. *Darkness*. There was the crucifixion. *Darkness*. And then there was the lifeless body brought down and placed in the tomb. *Darkness. Darkness. Darkness*.

I don't think this is accidental. We are kind of like those fireflies. Our lives are filled with oscillation between light and darkness, aren't they? Palm Sunday, last week, the faithful throughout the world gathered to celebrate the triumph of the Holy One, who rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, because his work was redeeming love and his ways are peace. *Light*. Then we heard how Palm Sunday was devastated by the senseless killings of Christians in Egypt. *Darkness*. Wednesday evening the children of this church gathered at an Agape meal to understand the

ancient roots of this divine meal that we will share and to pray together. *Light*. But as we prayed, we prayed for children like them in Syria and San Bernadino, whose lives have not been like ours. *Darkness*.

John's gospel says that it was still dark when the women went to the tomb and found it empty. And in any other gospel, I would take that as just chronological or geographic information, but not for John. His gospel always plays on themes of darkness and light, like an old poet or artisan, crafting it all together in a way that leads to a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

Hear what I think he intended: It was so early in the morning. *Darkness*. They went to the grave of their friend. *Darkness*. They found it empty and ran away afraid because they thought someone had stolen the last single connection that they had to him. *Darkness. Darkness. Darkness*. But... they ran to the tomb and found it empty. *Light*. They saw the burial linens lying there, and those don't really "slide off" three days later. *Light*. And they did not yet understand, but already they were

beginning to believe. *Light*. And there were angels, though I notice in the story, they don't seem to convince Mary Magdalene. Her grief is profound. At first, neither did Jesus! She thought he was the gardener. Then he said her name, and she said his. *Light*. You remember how he once said that his sheep know him, and they hear his voice. That was indeed what ushered in the life and light.

But there is the funniest about resurrection, life and light: it is mysterious and brilliantly elusive. Elusive was always the way of Jesus, though, wasn't it? When they went to Jerusalem when he was twelve, he escaped to the Temple. In another odd story, on one of his unpopular days, the bible says people were trying to throw him off a cliff... but he passed right through them. Then Pontius Pilate and the Jewish authorities had him crucified to end his message forever. We know how that worked out. And then at the empty tomb, finally having recognized her Lord, Mary wants to hold onto him, but he says no. People have wondered why. I suspect that was always his way. In him was light, and the light was the life of all

people. But it is never to be held onto! It is to be seen and embraced and lived, but never to be possessed.

That is something I remember as a child, wanting so badly to catch the lightning bugs. I bet some of you did, too. We would catch them and put them in mason jars and poke holes in the lid. And soon we were performing firefly funerals! Because the surest way to kill them was to try to hold onto them. And at some point, we had to learn to put those childish ways behind us if we were going to let the fireflies live and continue to pierce the darkness. That is true of the joy and the mystery of resurrection. Once you have held it, if only briefly, it changes the experience of darkness. In fact, I suspect we come to experience the darkness differently. Then when darkness strikes, we begin to wonder where and when and how light and life might not soon show up.

Last night, at the Cathedral of St. Mark in Alexandria, where a week ago people were killed on Palm Sunday, a large group of Muslims showed up for the Easter Vigil. They did not go in; they stood outside praying, serving as

a wall of human shields in order to protect those broken Christians so badly in need of resurrection. That's light.

Wednesday night, at our Agape Supper, I got to hear the prayers of a young girl not related to me. She has a girl in her class at school who is a bully, who is cruel, who upsets other children. So this year during Lent, she decided she was going to pray everyday for that other girl, the bully. She has. She said she fell asleep a couple of times, but almost every day in Lent she has prayed for her enemy. As we prayed, I said what we always say, *we pray of all those whom we name now, silently or aloud.* And her quiet voice broke the silence as she prayed for God to bless her complicated friend. That is light.

Years ago, I had a young man come and talk to me during Holy Week. He was coming of age, dealing with things. He told his youth group at church that he was gay, and they told him not to come back. He was broken. He quoted the bible to me, chapter and verse, heaping words of condemnation on himself. I tried to talk through all of that with him, but truth be told it was more than we

could solve in an hour during Holy Week. So I invited him to come on Easter. I told him we would welcome him.

I saw him come in just after the service started. He sat in the back corner by himself. He didn't come up for Communion, and my thoughts were filled by the fear that his isolation from God was only being confirmed. Well, that was until after the service. After the service he handed me his bulletin, his order of service. There he had underlined the words that Peter spoke in Acts 10, demonstrating exactly how the experience of Christ and his resurrection had changed everything Peter had once believed in life. "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." He underlined it and circled it, and wrote the words "no partiality," "God shows no partiality" all over his Easter bulletin. He drew flowers growing up out of those holy words. That is light.

John's gospel says that it was early in the morning, that it was still dark, when the women went to the tomb and found it empty. There in a place of death and darkness,

light began to shine. And Mary wanted to hold onto it. But Jesus said no. The surest way to kill resurrection is to try to hold onto it. She had to let it go and allow it to show her the way back to God.

One more story. You all know that John Dragat, a dear friend of this parish, has been sick, and we have been praying for him. Yesterday Ella and I were walking home from an Easter Egg Hunt. She saw some beautiful flowers growing, and she went to pick them. (I hope they weren't your flowers! If they were, it was probably just a rabbit.) She picked the flowers and she looked at me and she said unbidden, "I need to give these flowers to John Dragat. He will need something beautiful for Easter." That's light.

Dear Finn, today we welcome you into the sacred mystery of resurrection. We do not own it, to be sure, but we share in its wonderful gift. And we entrust you today to the One who once stumbled out of the grave on crucified feet and made the whole creation new. He is the one who gives resurrection and life. And I for one cannot wait until those stories of his life and his light begin to

show up in you. Remember, you are one of God's beloved fireflies. When your time comes, we won't try to hold onto you. We will expect you to fly off into the darkness and show light.