

Vigil of Easter 2011 Matthew 28:1-10

Religious writers and speakers often use metaphors and paradoxes, which just as often annoys the readers and hearers.

It is assumed by many that they haven't the strength or the honesty to look hard enough at what they really want to say, or possibly being afraid to face contradictions, or having to choose.

"It's a mystery", we say. And the reply is "If you really can't talk about it, don't. If you can talk about it, you can talk clearly."

Of course, it is not so simple. We use figures and images and paradoxes a good deal in other contexts. We speak of "killing with kindness" or of someone "having the vices of their virtues," of "being so nice you could kick them."

We do this because language cannot keep up with the fluidity of the real world with its subtle and puzzling character.

Our language doesn't keep up with the multiplicity and interrelatedness and elusiveness of truth.

We speak in metaphors and paradoxes because we have to speak in a way that keeps our deepest questions alive.

Rowan Williams characterizes certain spiritual experiences as “a ray of darkness.”

The 17th se Welsh Henry Vaughan poet wrote
“There is in God (some say),
A deep but dazzling darkness.”

Some have spoken of being scorched by the closeness of the holy.

These persons are saying that when the ray of darkness illumines... it brings a kind of vertigo...that interrupts blindness and ignorance...cutting through the darkness.

Such experience, however brief or prolonged, can make us strangers to ourselves...to things we have taken for granted.

I suppose it can be like having to find a new way of knowing myself.

When God’s dazzling darkness breaks upon my darkness, the first thing that I know is that I don’t know, and might never have known, what is really at the deepest heart-center of life.

And so I engage in something like metaphor or paradox, because I can't keep up with what is happening, because the language I usually speak has been challenged at its heart.

When God breaks in, my picture of what it is to be me, and my attitude about life around me have been deeply disturbed and challenged.

These are deeply holy moments when the world of our experience or memory confronts us with something utterly beyond control or understanding...and it is like a ray of darkness.

Women and men of God have at times said that in the "inner place of sight" that they "have seen God"... and I think by that they mean that they have been profoundly interrupted and turned inside out and put to question at a deep level...the regularities and securities of their lives made provisional...language rendered impotent...and something like metaphor and things like paradox are employed to capture the subtlety if not confusion of the experience.

It must have been something like this for Mary Magdalene and the other Mary...and for the guards.

The evangelist Matthew writes as if his words cannot catch up with his experience.

Not only do we have a great earthquake, but a descending angel with a countenance like lightening and clothing as blinding white as pure snow, and guards, guards mind you, who shake with fear and fall like dead men.

And then Matthew has the women fleeing the tomb not only with great joy, but also with fear.

They have come close as one could to the fire, and they are scorched.

Their dead Rabbi is not in the tomb but present with them.

Life for them and the ones back in Galilee will never again be totally understandable...will not be able to be reduced again to some set of rationally validated principles.

This is God's Easter!

The darkness that still hungers for a hope that is beyond what is possible...the empty place where some great hope used to be and is mostly empty...

The darkness that hungers still for the great light that has gone out...

The crazy but now failed dream of a holy light shining in an extraordinary man from Nazareth...has now been overtaken with a dazzling brightness!

The fairy-tale like truth that we hoped beyond anything we have ever hoped for, ever, is true once again among us...and is true in the sense that something can be truer than anything we have yet hoped for.

Not what is small-sized, reasonable, understandable, expected in the sense that we expect the sun to rise tomorrow.

No, not in that sense is it so, but in a history-changing, life-changing way. In a way that reorders our life!

And our language fails us.

Into the depths of God's Good-Friday-absence, God in Jesus of Nazareth is once again present with us...and it is beyond our words or thoughts to contain.

That is the story we celebrate...true for us beyond word and thought and imagination.

“There is in God (some say),
A deep but dazzling darkness.”

Details in the gospel stories of resurrection vary and differ, and we may if not careful, get caught in questions appropriate to historical investigation or the wonderments about whether a thing like this can actually happen.

But not this night!

Now we are pierced by a ray out of the darkness that burns as well as heals...apprehended by the dazzling darkness of a God who is not only beyond our language, but is doing for us a new creation beyond our wildest dreams in the resurrection of the Light of the world.

Earlier this night we lighted the new fire of the Easter Vigil.
And as this new light came into the church we sang “The Light of Christ...Thanks be to God”...over and over we sang that glorious bidding and refrain.

I like to think at that moment that darkness and death are not only overcome, but also redeemed with us into the arms of God.

The beauty of darkness deepened by the Light of the living Christ.

Death overcome; God becoming all in all.

This is the night...now...when Israel came out of Egypt...

This is the night...now...when all who believe in Christ are delivered...

This is the night when Christ broke open the bonds of death.

This is the most holy and blessed darkness where restoration and healing come from “Christ, the Morning Star who knows no setting...who gives his light to all creation.”

The darkness of Good Friday lingers still. The stinging death of those we love remains in us. The disappointments of our lives are hard to forget. Our own failures return to haunt.

But tonight we celebrate God’s dazzling darkness...bewildering at moments to our ordinary perceiving...

Yet by this rising the darkness is now full of grace...
full of God’s blazing mystery of Love.

Brilliant with a Love that does not let us go.

“Made like him, like him we rise/Ours the cross, the grave, the skies.”