

Camille Cook Murray
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
April 21st, 2019

Easter Sunday
Luke 24:1-12
Washington, D.C.

At Easter there are three great expectations of those attending church. They expect triumphant music, a beautiful sanctuary adorned with flowers, and a powerful Easter sermon that knocks their socks off. Well, the choir and brass have already rattled the rafters with glorious music; you can see that a sea of Easter blossoms surrounding you, so I say...two of three isn't bad. A very happy Easter to each and every one of you – those of you who are here every Sunday and those of you visiting us for the first time. This is our great joyful feast day – it is a day of much rejoicing as we consider and celebrate the holy mysteries of our faith.

I was talking to my daughter's preschool teacher, who is celebrating Passover this week. She asked me, knowing I was a minister, knowing the week we were in if I could just explain to her the whole symbolism of the Easter bunny. "No, not really," I said. "Well what about the chocolate eggs," she asked, "What's behind those?" "No, I can't really explain that either." She seemed surprised, "Well what about the whole cross and tomb thing then?" Yeah, what about the whole cross and tomb thing then? That's the exact question asked on the first Easter morning – having just experienced the scene of the cross the women stare into an empty tomb and have to figure out just what to make of it.

Tommy Caldwell, a professional rock climber, spent six years of his life practicing and planning the seemingly impossible climb of the Dawn Wall, a 3,000-foot rock face in Yosemite. Tommy and his climbing partner Kevin tethered themselves to the side of the rock for weeks as they slowly made their way from impossible pitch to impossible pitch. There were 31 pitches they had to pass to climb this rock face and pitch 15 was the hardest. It is about 70 feet of horizontal sidestepping across a piece of smooth granite. For days, attempt after attempt, this smooth rock beat them down, with almost no holds for their bloody and worn fingers to grasp. In the documentary, *The Dawn Wall*, you watch Tommy and Kevin being battered by this pitch and you wonder if they will ever pass this obstacle or if they will have to retire their dream and return to the ground defeated.

Pitch 15 for many is the news of Easter morning. At the tomb, the women were there to visit the body with their spices and their oils and their tears. At the sight of the empty tomb they were terrified and perplexed. Jesus had told them that he would rise from the dead. But throughout the days surrounding his death and burial and resurrection they struggled to believe it, and still in the face of the empty tomb they struggled to get over their hurdles of doubt. Feeling they had little to cling to but their grief, the women went to tell the disciples about the empty tomb. But Luke reports, 'the words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.' They were all stuck at pitch 15.

To get over this hurdle they were going to have to believe the heavenly messengers in the dazzling clothes telling them Jesus was not there but had been risen. They were going to have to believe Jesus' own predictions that he would be killed but then rise from the dead. They were going to have to believe in resurrection – that by God's power death could in fact be conquered. For many, this is a tricky pitch to traverse.

Luke's version of Easter morning is a different type of tale than the other gospel writers who present more theatrical responses to the resurrection. The other gospel writers tell it like the empty tomb was a pitch that was easy to pass where the witnesses immediately ran to tell the good news with bombastic shouting, and believing, and rejoicing. But the morning unfolds differently for Luke, we do not actually get to pinpoint a moment of conversion – when did the women first believe, when were the disciples eyes opened, when did they start to share the news? Was it at the tomb, or when Peter returned later, or was it afterwards on the Emmaus road? I appreciate that for Luke, faith takes hold slowly, with struggle, with the need to remember, reflect, and truly stretch one's self. New Testament scholar Darrell Bock in his commentary on Luke says, "So slowly do the disciples come to see that God's plan has not been derailed."

Slowly the dawn comes, the light shines, the hurdles are passed, and faith takes root. We sometimes assume that for the disciple's faith just happened on day one – before Easter there was doubt and after Easter there was faith. But Luke's leaves room for other scenarios of conversion. When we think about creation in the Genesis narrative, first there was darkness and then there was light, clear distinguishing and creation of order. And yet anyone who has watched the sunrise knows that dawn is less like a cosmic light switched being turned on and more like the day slowly pushing the night out of the way. There is no clear and comforting boundary between darkness and light – there is a blending, a greeting, a relinquishing of space and time. And that is where Luke's revelations of faith take place – not as a switch flicked in the presence of the empty tomb but in the slow entre of the dawn of God's light.

I have a feeling that for some of us, at least some of the time, Easter joy comes to us, atom by atom, glimmers of light after receding times of darkness, less bursts of trumpets and more whistles of celestial truths stirring our hearts towards belief. Paul is right when he writes, "We shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye." But sometimes that change takes place gradually, ineffably, one slow pitch at a time until faith arrives, light shines, and the dawn has turned from doubt to joy – and that becomes our Easter.

Tommy and Kevin on the Dawn Wall strategically do much of their hardest climbing in the darkest parts of the night, with only headlamps illuminating their path – it is in the darkness when the rock is the coldest that their fingers find new traction and holds. They progress towards their summit in both darkness and light and in the fragile space between the two. So it is for lives of faith – far less light switch moments and far more experiences like the struggle on pitch 15 –

relentless, soul searching, painful movements where grace and love and faith reveal themselves. It is here where we come to believe that there might in fact be a God who knows us and loves us, there might be forgiveness for our mistakes, there might be higher callings for our lives, there might be redemption in the face of suffering, there might be miracles in the world, and that there might even be something beyond the grave. “So slowly do the disciples come to see that God’s plan has not been derailed.”

I have a confession; I used to think that the most boring part of the church service, after the announcements of course, was the reciting of the creeds. I understood it as being useful for helping us learn the doctrine embedded in the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed and all of the confessionals of the church but still it was lackluster at best. My thinking has evolved around this liturgical moment in the Sunday service and it is now one of my favorite moments in our weekly worship hour. Last year, for me there were times when I felt I was stuck on pitch 15. I was not entirely clear about how I was going to traverse the path ahead and being in church, listening to this community profess the faith we believe in helped me.

There were Sunday’s when as soon as the creed began, all of a sudden a lump in my throat would form in my throat, preventing me from making an audible affirmation. But the collective voices, some strong and some weak, some young and some old, some stumbling through the phrases, some confidently projecting the familiar lines – that sound buoyed me in significant ways. Sometimes you are the boisterous one in the pew – who confidentially professes, ‘He is risen, He is risen indeed’. Sometimes you are the one who struggles to your feet, terrified and trembling. But here in the church, every week we get to hear the faith of the church, and we get to experience the cloud of witnesses, those who have made it beyond pitch 15, together say, “I believe in God the Father Almighty...and in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord; he was crucified, dead, and buried;...the third day he rose from the dead;...I believe in the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting.” I believe in those things too and sometimes it is good to be reminded. In face of the holy mysteries of life and faith, we let those voices and those words be a light for our paths.

I do not quite know how Mary Magdalene, and Joanna, and Mary the Mother of James came to believe but I’m fairly certain they didn’t do it alone. I don’t know how Peter, and John, and James came to believe but I know it was done in community with others struggling towards faith and light and hope. The Easter stories are never told in isolation, they are always told in community. In the good company of other travelers we come to believe – some of us quickly and joyfully, some of us slowly and painfully.

Tommy and Kevin did in the end conquer pitch 15 and the entire Dawn Wall. We all have pitch 15’s in our lives, moments of struggle when we are not sure how we will get onto the next chapter – it’s the job hunting, the relationship struggles, the health issues, the family dramas, the personal trials, the crisis of confidence, the

painful grief. These are the places where faith is tested and it is here we need to rely on the collective witness and wisdom of one another. The heavenly messengers at the tomb ask the women, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” Do not look for the living God, the risen Christ among the dead – look for your faith among the living, in the company of one another, and in my experience, and in the witness of scripture, you will find it and Easter joy will be yours – trumpets, flowers, and all.

Thanks be to God. Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed. Amen.