It Starts in the Dark

Sermon preached by Jennifer Hudson, St. Thomas' Episcopal Church, Bethel, CT, April 4, 2026

Do you remember the first time you were alone in the dark? For me, it was a power outage during a thunderstorm. I don't recall how young I was, but I do remember I was alone in my bedroom, probably doing homework since it was a little while after dinner. There had been a loud crackle and bright flash of lightening. Then the familiar hum of the appliances fell silent. Also falling into silence was the unfolding drama of whatever my parents had been watching in the living room on TV. Twilight had already given way to darkness outside, but now, without electricity, it enveloped my bedroom. Hearing nothing but the shrill of the winds and the rumbles of thunder, sitting there in complete darkness, I found myself alone and afraid. My young imagination was already envisioning what ghostly forms might be lurking in the darkness. Then my mom knocked and offered me a lit candle. I welcomed its warm glow, delighting in the way the flame danced on the wick. Meanwhile, the winds continued to howl, as did the rumbles of thunder, but I wasn't afraid of them or of the darkness anymore. I was too enthralled by the light of the candle.

I'm sure many of us have a memory like this—maybe also from childhood, maybe from later, maybe it was at another Easter Vigil service or maybe at tonight's for the first time. In this holy night, before we hear the glorious music sung by the choir, before we smell the lilies, before we taste the wonderful breakfast foods at brunch, we begin here, in the stillness, in the darkness. But it's not complete stillness or darkness. We hear the cars passing by on Greenwood Avenue. We feel the warmth and hear the crackle of the new fire from which we light the Paschal Candle. We sit holding candles in a darkened church as we listen to stories that detail God's extravagant,

unconditional love for us and the lengths to which God will go, because of that love, to renew and free us. Something is still happening in the darkness, whether we're aware of it or not.

That's what Mary Magdelene and Mary (most likely the mother of James and Joseph) discover: that something has been happening in the darkness of the tomb. They arrive quietly in their grief, just as the hint of darkness gives way to the dawning sun, expecting to tend to death. But then a great earthquake rumbles, and an angel descends to roll back the stone and to tell them Jesus has been raised and is on his way to Galilee. Can you imagine what these two women must have been thinking and feeling? Their fear? Their awe? Their questions: he's raised but how come we're not seeing him come out of that tomb? And how is it that he's already on his way to Galilee before you even came to roll that stone away? What they encounter is both mind-blowing and heart-stirring. The two Marys arrive at that tomb with grief, only to leave with joy. They come in silence but leave running to tell the good news. Then they share a beautiful reunion with Jesus. And whether by the angel or by Jesus himself, they are told, "Do not be afraid."

In which dark tombs might we find ourselves tonight? What do we grieve? What "ghosts" of the past or present or future haunt us and keep us bound in fear? Perhaps it's the unexpected loss of a loved one, or a divorce, or a relationship that turned sour. Perhaps it's a health challenge or the uncertainty of how to pay the monthly bills as costs of living skyrocket. Perhaps it's the cruelty and injustices and wars that continue to unfold before us daily. In all these situations, and more, it's so easy to lose hope, to feel as though we've been forsaken, to feel that darkness will reign supreme.

But tonight darkness does *not* have the last word—not over Jesus, and not over us.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Brown Taylor writes in her book *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, "Resurrection is always announced with Easter lilies, the sound of trumpets, bright streaming light. But it did not happen that way. If it happened in a cave, it happened in complete silence, in absolute darkness…new life starts in the dark. Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb, it starts in the dark."

The Easter Vigil is our reminder that darkness is not only about times of despair or uncertainty or loss, which are all times when we think God has abandoned us. Darkness is also about creation, of God being silently present and yet powerfully active, even when we don't think so, even when we're not aware of it.

Tonight we learn that the darkness isn't dark to God. Darkness is where God is most at work creating and renewing. It's where God puts flesh on dry bones and breathes new life into them. It's where we're restored in our slumber to greet the next day. It's where we're given a warm glow and a dancing flame to drive out our fears. In darkness, we hear the rumble of cars, of thunder, of an earthquake—all reminders that the Spirit still moves among us. Darkness is where Jesus rises from the dead. Twilight may give way to darkness, but darkness also gives way to dawn. Tonight we are reminded that darkness is not to be feared. Rather, it creates new possibilities.

It's my hope that when we leave this beautiful Easter Vigil service tonight, we will have found ourselves so enthralled by the light of resurrection, that we will share the good news of it, of renewal made possible by God's quiet but active presence in the darkness, and of fears and sorrows dispelled as we boldly and with great joy proclaim: Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!