

April 9, Easter Day (*John 20:1-18*)

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When I was 12, I had a conversion experience on Easter Sunday. I was standing on the hill behind my grandparents' southern Indiana house in my Easter dress, looking out over their incredible view of the Ohio River, when I suddenly had a sense that everything I was seeing was suffused with the presence of God. All in one moment, I knew God was vividly and clearly a part of everything around me, including me. My life changed.

We must have gone to Easter services afterward, but I don't remember it. It was standing on that hill where God became real for me. It wasn't exactly like Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus in the garden, but in some way, that morning I too heard God call my name and say, "I'm alive."

However, in recent years, Easter Sunday has become a day I struggle to feel God's presence. You might say I have become an Easter Grinch. Or maybe it's just that I'm an introvert with a growing oversensitivity to noise and crowds. Easter morning is a cacophony of joy, colors, and alleluias. The pews are packed with people, the fragrance of lilies and hyacinths fills the air, the music—sometimes with trumpets and strings—is booming and full. I am grateful so many others find it wonderful, but for me, it has become too much.

Holy Week has often made more sense to me and my Christian journey—the sharing of a meal, the earnest awkwardness of foot washing, sitting together as the lights are turned out, the somber quiet, the terrible story of what humans can do to one another, the love and calm of Jesus persisting through it all.

Many churches offer the quiet of a sunrise service. In my tradition, many churches hold an Easter Vigil on Saturday night. As the sun goes down, the Easter fire is lit, and a deacon carries the paschal candle through the dark, singing and proclaiming, “The light of Christ!” three times. Light slowly fills the darkened church as the people in the pews each light tapers from the light of the one paschal candle. Then there is a long service of readings, music, and sometimes baptisms and confirmations. Then all the lights come on with the story of the empty tomb, and we sing alleluia hymns, even as it’s still dark outside. I have attended three Easter Vigils outdoors since the pandemic, which adds another glorious layer of cosmic mystery—a full hemisphere of sky at dusk above, no barrier between the top of your head and the infinity of the universe.

I first met God in the bright sunlight of Easter morning, but decades later, as my own sense of unknowing of who or what God is grows, I find myself drawn to the predawn darkness at the tomb. The hazy confusion, a stillness in a lonely place, the disorienting realization that something unexpected has happened. The longer I live, the less I know how to approach this unscientific but irrepressible story of resurrection. I feel less like a confident preacher in a pulpit and more like someone who is faithful but has gotten a little lost, bumping into things, still seeking the living God but with a sense that a living faith is less about being certain and more about keeping my eyes open.

I take heart, though, because I see myself in good company in the story of God’s people. Over and over, this confused and bumbling state is described in scripture. Both Mary Magdalene and Peter go to the tomb before dawn, probably sleep-deprived, foggy, and distraught, and have no idea how to understand what they are seeing. Peter runs away, and Mary Magdalene thinks she is talking to the gardener. Nicodemus seeks out Jesus in the middle of the night and is totally flummoxed by Jesus’ words to him.

Jacob wrestles with an angel in the middle of the night, all alone by the river. The angel asks for his name but will not tell Jacob their own. The Israelites wander in the desert for 40 years, wondering why or what for, and probably feel more lost than chosen. Moses has to enter the cloud of unknowing on Mt. Sinai before he can receive God’s word. Even afterward, the idolatry, constant doubt, fatigue, and haranguing of the Israelites is perhaps not the whole and perfect fulfillment of the journey he might have imagined.

This Easter, I will seek out another Vigil service where I can sit in the dark with my candle and be like Mary Magdalene, waiting at the empty tomb and listening for Jesus to call my name and say again: "I am alive!"