

Sleepers, wake!
John 20:1-18, Easter Sunday, Year A
24 April 2011
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

In an old, long ago-polished wooden box at home, I keep a stack of letters written in the 1950s, when an Air Mail stamp cost 3 cents. The letters are brittle and yellowed, and they are penned in a script from a bygone era, when penmanship was itself an art. Written in Enid, Oklahoma, and posted to Houston, Texas, the first letter in the stack, dated December 31, 1950, begins joyously, with stories of the holidays and hopes for the new decade. Soon, though, the letters' foreshadowing darkens. One woman writing to another tells of the increasing health concerns of her husband. By early 1956, that husband has himself traveled from Enid to Houston to be under the care of a hotshot young heart surgeon named Michael DeBakey. Before the patient can be stabilized for experimental heart surgery, he dies. The final letter in the stack, dated June 5, 1956, is written not from Enid but from McGehee, Arkansas, where the forty-six year old widow and her young son have moved home to be with her family. This letter, so starkly different from the holiday epistle which began the series six years earlier, says this:

[I] hardly know where to begin. Everything is such a mess. Furniture is badly worn, walls dirty, and etc. Every time I begin to concentrate on a specific job three or four people drop in and I get delayed...Everything in the apartment reminds me of [him]. I don't like to stop moving or be by myself. Life seems so empty that I nearly forget to count my blessings.

Light has gone from the young woman's life. It is as if her eyes have closed, and she has fallen asleep.

In the first third of the 20th Century, the most fertile missionary ground on earth—the shining light of missionary zeal—was China. Seven thousand Christian missionaries poured into the country and established hundreds of hospitals and thousands of schools, converting the Chinese to the Christian faith along the way. When the Communists under Chairman Mao finally chased Chang Kai-Shek off the mainland in 1949, events were set in motion that resulted in *all* Christian missionaries leaving virtually overnight. As the best-hearted fled, they worried and prayed for the some four million Chinese Christians they were leaving behind, and with good cause. Chairman Mao's wife made it her personal mission to stamp out Christianity in China. Chinese Christians found themselves imprisoned, "re-educated" in special camps, and in

some gruesome instances even crucified with nails driven through their palms. Light had gone from the mission field, and it was as if Christian China had fallen asleep.¹

As some of you will remember from the news coverage in *The Roanoke Times*, in June 28, 2008, twelve-year-old Hunter Grove let go of the ski rope on Smith Mountain Lake and careened head-first into a dock. His father Carl, who was driving the boat, watched the scene over his shoulder in horror. By the time he made it to Hunter, the boy was unconscious and bleeding from his ears. Hunter was airlifted to Charlottesville, and the doctors' prognosis was grim. Quite literally, the light had gone from Hunter's life. He had fallen asleep and could not wake up.

Hearing any of these stories, Mary Magdalene would say, "Yes! I know what that is. I know what it is for the light to go out. I know what it is to fall asleep and lose all hope."

Like the Christian missionaries in China, Mary's fortunes changed from zeal to terror overnight. Like Hunter Grove's father, Mary witnessed in horror the devastation of the one she loved the very most, helpless to step in and stop his pain. Like the young widow in Arkansas, Mary wandered about in the aftermath, not sure in her emptiness what to do or where to find meaning.

The Sabbath over, Mary goes to Jesus' tomb dazed and confused. She goes there because even after the crucifixion Jesus' body suffered the added indignity of burial without proper anointing. She has come to do the only thing she can think to do: apply aromatic spices to her beloved's body in a final, furtive, desperate act of love. But when Mary arrives at the tomb, Jesus is not there. In her virtual sleepwalking, she becomes frantic to find him, and she almost collides headlong with a man she assumes to be the gardener. "Please, give him back!" she pleads.

And then the man standing before Mary speaks. As the song says, "The most precious Word of Life/cleared his throat and ended silence." It is Jesus the Christ standing before her, alive.

In every conceivable way, Mary's eyes are opened. The darkness flees. She wakes up from the emptiness. And in that moment she is, just as surely as Jesus is, resurrected. In all the Gospel post-Easter resurrection stories, it is the same. Those asleep and walking in darkness

¹ Philip Yancey chronicles this history in chapter four of his book *What Good is God?: In Search of a Faith that Matters*.

have their eyes opened by the presence of the risen Jesus, and they experience their own resurrection.

Hunter Grove woke up weeks after the accident on Smith Mountain Lake. It was weeks later still that he began to speak and months before he could walk. But all these things he did. Seven months after his accident, with a long road of recovery still ahead of him, Hunter himself said, “When I was dead and my eyes were dead, I couldn’t hear what you were saying, but I remember you holding my hand.”

Somehow through that darkness, Easter came!

Fifty years after the Christian missionaries were expelled from China, some were finally allowed to return under strict limitations. They landed in China in virtual hopelessness. But they found that the four million Christians they had to abandon half a century before had burgeoned to eighty million, a thriving church who gathered not in comfort but under assault and who knew of what they spoke when they proclaimed each and every week, “Jesus lives!”

Somehow in that closed-off land, Easter came!

I have one other letter in that wooden box at home. It is written in 1962 from my grandmother to my father, who was by then a sophomore in college. The earlier letters are so hard for me to read, because my grandmother was the most faithful person I ever knew. Fifty-five years removed, her emptiness and hopelessness after my grandfather’s death in 1956 still bring me to tears. And yet, the 1962 letter is the testimony of a Christian wide-awake, one who sees the world with open eyes through the light of the living Christ. This letter, motherly advice to a barely-grown son, ends with these words:

Your happiness will come from within and not from material things. Unless you live close to God life will not be worth living, but with Him anything can be accomplished. You can take any hardship life deals you as long as He is at your side...My life has been beautiful and I have loved every minute of it.

Somewhere in the Good Friday between 1956 and 1962, Easter came.

Sleepers, wake! The world is ablaze with light. Jesus lives this day. He is resurrected, and his resurrection will meet us in whatever sorrow, whatever pain, whatever darkened world in which we find ourselves. The great Church Father Gregory of Nazianzus proclaims for all of us:

Yesterday I was crucified with Christ; today I am glorified in him.

Yesterday I was dead with Christ; today I am sharing in his resurrection.

Yesterday I was buried with him; today I am waking with him from the sleep of death.

The Lord is risen, indeed. *Amen.*