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Preached at Head of Christiana Presbyterian Church, April 5 2015

### **“Before Dawn”**

John 20:1-18

A cemetery is a strange place, isn't it? Eerie, sometimes. Often for us it occupies an in-between space of life meeting death, death meeting life. We don't like to think about what happens there, once the bodies get into their graves. Oftentimes we don't even get that far – we leave the casket perched on its rollers, hovering above the emptiness, as we say one last prayer and then turn away to let the funeral staff take care of getting the body, finally, underground.

The same is true for that odd silent day called Holy Saturday. It is the nether space between the mourning of Good Friday and the rejoicing of Easter Sunday; and when it begins, Jesus is in the tomb, and then by the time we get back at sunrise on Easter morning, the tomb is empty and the graveclothes are folded, no longer needed.

And we don't quite know what happened in between. We don't know what was going on that day, under the earth in the deep cool stillness of the tomb.

Was Jesus weaving a silken cocoon around himself, to grow wings and burst out just before morning, renewed and transformed? Or was Jesus busy descending into Hell, as the creeds affirm, grasping souls by the hand and pulling them up out of torment, like some grand Renaissance painting? Was he observing his sabbath, lying there on the hard stone shelf, coming slowly back to consciousness as God painstakingly knit his flesh back together?

How do we get from the agony and despair of the crucifixion to the astounding joy and new life of Easter morning?

And the truth is, we don't know, and we won't know. But the mystery is one of the things I love most about Easter, when we get right down to it.

I don't know how God brings life out of death; all I know is God *does*. I don't know how broken places are healed or torn things get mended or despair ever becomes hope. All I know is that, sure as the night becomes day, healing comes. And the scars will still remain, but slowly the blood clots and the wound scabs over and the white blood cells work away, and the skin regrows.

Well sure, but most of the time *dead* things stay dead! Yes. Except this one time they didn't.

And what Easter means for me is that God is life, and God is love, and God can do whatever God wants for God's beloved ones.

And I know that there is one force pulling us toward death, whether you call that entropy or sin or just the way the world works; and there is something else pulling us back toward wholeness and life and love. I know I am caught in their tug-of-war, and I suspect we all are, most of the time.

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And so this mystery – the sacred unknowing of these in-between spaces – that mystery means that God does not need us to be good enough or devoted enough or pious enough to “deserve” to be healed. That’s what grace is about. Somehow, miraculously, God finds us where we are, wherever we are, and tugs us back toward life.

Whether we’re feeling lost and alone, or mostly okay except for the nagging doubts in the back of our mind that we just don’t look at too closely, or like we might as well be dead in the tomb with Jesus, God is there with us. God has been there, God is there, and God brings life there too.

Sometimes it comes so slow we might not notice right away, and sometimes it’s a rush of warmth like a bear hug from a dear friend, and suddenly the weight lifts from your chest and the world is a little less broken. All these things that tug us back toward life – these are God and these are Easter, and sometimes there is nothing else to do but throw back our heads and shout in thanksgiving.

Christ is risen! Indeed! And so I lift my voice with the poet e.e. cummings:

i thank You God for most this amazing  
day:for the leaping greenly spirits of trees  
and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything  
which is natural which is infinite which is yes

(i who have died am alive again today,  
and this is the sun’s birthday; this is the birth  
day of life and of love and wings: and of the gay  
great happening illimitably earth)

how should tasting touching hearing seeing  
breathing any–lifted from the no  
of all nothing–human merely being  
doubt unimaginable You?

(now the ears of my ears awake and  
now the eyes of my eyes are opened)