

Matthew 27:27-54  
April 5, 2020

Grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! Amen.

From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And about three o'clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" that is, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45-46)

Have you ever hoped so much for something that just never came? Many years ago, prior to going to seminary in order to become a pastor within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, I had a career in the insurance industry. Like so many, I was doing my best to climb the corporate ladder working diligently, taking continuing education credits to gain further knowledge, and whatever else I could to further my resume in hopes of landing a supervisory position. Two times, I had my opportunity. On each occasion, my hopes were high but quickly thrust aside upon hearing the news the job had gone to someone else. Both times, I was surrounded by a momentary period of darkness in which I struggled to see the future. The wonderful little world I had envisioned in my mind was shaken and seemingly crumbled apart leaving me stunned. Yet, both times, God broke through that darkness and revealed resurrection hope. Resurrection light

"From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until 3 in the afternoon."

Three hours. Three days Jesus' body will lay in a pitch-black tomb. One can only imagine the hopes of so many were dashed away as Jesus was sentenced to death and darkness came over the whole earth that day. Those who lined the city streets laying their coats and palm branches upon the ground as Jesus entered the Holy City of Jerusalem. Shouting their "hosannas", shouts of rescue and salvation from the oppressive hand of the Roman empire. Indeed, the long-awaited promised One of God had arrived. Here at last was the king of all kings. Yet, within the span of a few days, the glimmer of hope that cast into their darkened lives must have suddenly been snuffed out like a candle in the wind as Jesus was arrested.

Our gospel passage ends at verse 54, but in verse 55 we hear, “Many women were also there, looking on from a distance; they had followed Jesus from Galilee and had provided for him.” I wonder if their hopes, too, gave way in the darkness that engulfed them that afternoon as Jesus cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Or the secure footing they stood upon suddenly eroded away as the earth shook following his last breath.

“From noon on, darkness came over the whole land until 3 in the afternoon.”

Three hours of darkness. Three days of uncertainty, fear, grief, and perhaps hopelessness. Yet, there was hope on the horizon. There was light that soon would shine through the darkness. There was soon life that cut through the ugly stench of death. These periods of momentary darkness would give way. The earth that shook beneath the feet of these women gathered near the cross would once more become solid footing near the empty tomb of Easter morning.

This past week, I delivered a supply of handmade masks by a few of our quilters to the Shelter House in Iowa City that reaches out with the compassion of Christ to the homeless. Instead of taking the interstate into Iowa City I decided instead to head south through Downey and then west along Highway 6. It didn’t take long to see grassy areas alongside the roadway that had been intentionally burned. I even saw one farmer in the process of burning a grassy area that cut through the fertile farmland of his fields. As these grassy areas burn, they give way to the darkest shade of black one will ever see. The existence of life fades away. Yet, I knew from experience this was only a momentary period. Soon and very soon small shoots of green will break through the blackness of those dried out lands. Glimmers of new life will emerge. Slivers of hope will sprout forth.

We draw near the cross this morning. We journey with those faithful women to the cross on Good Friday and this year we don’t have to imagine the darkness they experienced that day when all hope seemed lost. The darkness is very real. The fears continue to shake our once solid footings. The hopes for tomorrow give way as two more weeks of school are cancelled, and social distancing becomes the new norm and we scramble for make-shift masks. Our “hosannas” take on a different meaning this year as we cry for the saving grace of God to break into this darkness.

Three hours of darkness. Three days of death until life and light cut through the blackness, which covered the earth. I know you are scared. I, too, am scared. I know your hopes may at times give way to the darkness that has encroached upon us. I, too, have had moments when all hope seems lost. I know you grieve the loss of community with one another; especially, as we draw near the cross of Christ today and this holy week we embark on. I, too, grieve your absence as I preach into a camera unable to see you.

Yet, this darkness too will pass. This momentary period in which death seems to cast a blanket over the earth will give way to shoots of life breaking through the burnt fields we wander. Meadows of spring flowers and prairie grasses will emerge. God's glory will prevail. Our hope is never lost. In the words of the hymn<sup>i</sup> we will sing short, our hope lies near the cross where there's a precious fountain free to all, where the love and mercy of God meets us, where a bright and morning star sheds its beams around us, where the Lamb of God helps us walk day-by-day through the shadows o'er us, and where we watch and wait, trusting ever, till we reach the golden strand just beyond the river. Hope lies in this cross of death used by the empire as God transforms it into the cross of life eternal for the world in which God loves. Resurrection hope. Resurrection light. It is near. Very near. Indeed, it is already here.

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<sup>i</sup> "Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross"; Text: Fanny J. Crosby, 1820-1915; Music: William H. Doane, 1832-1915. Public domain.