

# Easter Shadows

Our Lenten journey is over. Our pilgrimage of faith merely has reached a resting place. Season by season—Advent, Epiphany, Lent, Easter—we move through many journeys.

Taken together they define our pilgrimage of faith. Each Sunday we celebrate the hope of Easter, gathering in the morning of the first day of the week to recall how the women came to the empty tomb. The brightness of Easter glory casts shadows that we will pass through, if not today, then in days to come.

Our Lenten journey is over. Easter is upon us. The sealed tomb that once held the lifeless body of the Crucified One now is open and empty. We lift our voices in praise, echoing the angelic guard at the tomb: “He is not here, but has risen” (Luke 24.5).

Before the sounds of praise are gone we glimpse the first Easter shadows. There is something both familiar and foreign about our Easter praise. Open and empty graves we know. Often we have gathered around an open and empty grave. Those graves are empty and open because they soon welcome the lifeless bodies of our family and friends. They are empty and open waiting to be filled; they are familiar. What is foreign to us is the reverse. Only in hope have we stood by open and empty graves, straining to voice praise through heavy sighs of sorrow.

On Easter Sunday we hear the prophet, Isaiah of the Restoration. Continuing the hopeful perspective of Isaiah of Jerusalem in the eighth century and Isaiah of the Exile in the sixth century, the prophet announces a new day in Jerusalem: “No more shall the sound of weeping be heard in [the city], or the cry of distress” (Is 65.19). The prophet claims that God is “about to create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind” (Is 65.17). Again, the shadows creep in. Weeping and distress have come upon Jerusalem since the prophet made his claims. The shouts of praise are muffled by the cries of sorrow.

The psalm, too, is a mix of light and shadow. “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever!” (118.1) and “This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it” (118.24) frame the psalm. From beginning to end the psalm lifts its voice in praise. Yet in the midst of the poem there are indications of distress and sorrow. The psalmist recalls “songs of victory” (118.15) in the context of having been “punished severely” but not being given “over to death” (118.18). Gratitude complements hope: “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation” (118.21). The psalm is a microcosm of Easter shadows: hope, sorrow, and gratitude.

Corinthians is stark in its honesty about Easter shadows. “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to pitied,” Paul writes (1 Cor 15.19). With a sentence the epistle distinguishes the light of Easter from its shadows. Hope in Christ is at least about “this life,” but it also extends to the life to come.

As an illustration of the already-and-not-yet character of the center of Christian faith the apostle develops an analogy from the world of agriculture. “Christ [is] the first fruits,” Paul writes. “Then at his coming [are] those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor 15.23). Harvest season extends from late spring through late fall. Some “fruits” mature early and others mature late. There is a continuity between early and late harvest. The “first fruits” encourage a confidence that the last fruits will mature. The confession “He is not here, but has risen” (Luke 24.5) carries with it the promise that we, too, will be raised.

The epistle does not shrink from the shadows of Easter. Between the confession that Jesus left an open and empty grave and the hope that followers of Jesus, too, will leave an open and empty grave is the truth—the reality—that death still is part of our lives. We still will gather around open and empty graves waiting to receive the lifeless bodies of our family and friends. Our gatherings, however, will be bold resistance to the finality of death. With the epistle we will stand in the shadows of Easter and declare that “the last enemy to be defeated is death” (1 Cor 15.26).

On Easter we have two Gospel narratives before us. Each describes a dawn visit

to the tomb of Jesus. Mary Magdalene (John 20.1) finds the tomb open and empty; in Luke's Gospel Magdalene is accompanied by "Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women" (24.10). The Gospel narratives also agree that the women report the discovery of the open and empty grave to the disciples. John says that "Peter and the other disciple" (20.2) investigate "but return to their homes" (20.10) because "they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead" (20.9). Luke notes that the women tell "the eleven" (24.9) what they have seen, but that "these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (24.11).

With the open and empty grave of Jesus in the near background the Gospels of John and Luke report Easter shadows, shadows of not understanding and disbelief. Take comfort in the honesty of the Gospel!

Open and empty graves always will evoke shadows of not understanding and disbelief. The hope of Easter always waits in the shadows to hear the good news of the angelic guard at the tomb: "He is not here, but has risen" (Luke 24.5). Easter hope and Easter shadows come together and carry us beyond Easter to another year of our pilgrimage of faith. As followers of Jesus we always live week by week, Easter to Easter, Easter shadows to Easter hope in the promises of the prophet, the psalm, the epistle, and the Gospel.

*[Richard F. Wilson](#) is Columbus Roberts Professor of Theology and Chair of the Roberts Department of Christianity at Mercer University in Macon, Ga.*