



LET IT SHINE!

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, CA, on Sunday, April 9, 2023

I don't know if you know this... But Easter really isn't about bunnies and eggs, or candies and flowers.

Easter is about something God did in our world that was utterly unprecedented. Easter is about something God did... FOR YOU. Easter is about something God did... FOR THE WHOLE WORLD.

Creation

If we go back to the beginning... the very beginning of the world... the book of Genesis. That was God's first act (that we know about). None of us were there, but God told us about it. He thought we'd want to know. He knew we'd NEED to know.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters."

(Genesis 1:1-2)

What Does It Mean... Formless and Empty?

Some people imagine there's a large piece of history that has been lost, between verse 1 and verse 2 (the "Gap Theory"). They say, "God created everything in perfect order and condition, but then it was all ruined by Satan and the fallen angels."

Clearly (at least, to me) that is the notion of someone who is not convinced of the sovereign power of God, and imagines the devil is stronger in some sense than God or beyond God's control.

Besides that, we have no other example in Scripture of God creating anything or anyone in a state of perfection or completion. Not one mention of it.

Apart from miraculous exceptions, everything God has created, has been created in nascent form, designed to grow, to change, to shift, to move toward completion. Seed to sprout to

stalk to full grown plant to fruitfulness. A woman's egg to infant to child to adolescent to adult to parent.

And for those of you who have experienced a new birth by the Spirit of God... for whom was that an instantaneous perfection of your life? No one. Are you not growing still—sometimes ever so slowly? Don't you still have a long way to go to become like Jesus?

So, let's set that silly notion aside, at least for this morning, and try to see something fresh from Scripture.

What if that was exactly what God intended for the earth's beginning—"formless and empty"? No evident purpose... yet bursting with potential (just under the surface)!

The whole planet was covered with "deep waters." No islands, no mountains, just water—as far as the eye could see in every direction. Isn't that "formless"? Isn't that "empty"?

"Darkness covered the deep waters." Now, we're accustomed to thinking of darkness as sinister, evil. But all of that kind of thinking came AFTER our knowledge of the fall, after Adam and Eve sinned, after people became selfish and greedy and violent, after evil was loosed in the world through disobedient people. But this was before.

What if "darkness" just meant "dark"? Martha and I once descended into a deep cave, 200 feet below the surface of the earth. When the tour guide turned out the electric lights, I could not see my own hand, waving, just inches from my nose. I was in the dark. It's another kind of formlessness. It's another kind of emptiness—without any light.

So, for God's second act, He said, "Light, be!" And there was light, there was a brilliant glow in the heavens above the water. But still the earth was formless and empty. Only now it was exposed—the shapelessness, the barrenness, and apparent purposelessness. No visible intent or design.

Of course, it's necessary here to use our imagination. We've never seen anything that had no form. We might even say, "That is what it means to 'see' something"—to distinguish visually its form, its shape, its color. Or, if we lack the ability to see, then smell or feel or sound. We depend on our senses to inform us of what is.

And if it's in the dark and has no form or fullness, then we can't understand it. We don't know what it is.

Of course, over the next six days, God made the sun and moon to light the day and night, and he gathered the seas in certain areas and raised up the land in other areas, and created all

kinds of vegetation, and animals and fish and birds, and at last, created our first father and mother.

Now fast forward with me thousands of years to the day before Jesus was killed.

Passover

Jesus and His disciples were at the home of his friends, Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha. They shared on of Martha's wonderful meals together. They probably told stories and made jokes, and sang together and prayed. There were lots of forms and lots of fullness. Life was rich and life was real.

That afternoon they walked two miles to the great city of Jerusalem. They had been there at other times, but that day Jesus was moved just by the sight of the city, sitting as it does on a prominent hill, its pale stones gleaming in the sunlight, and the top of the Temple rising tall above the city's walls.

That night they would share the annual Passover feast together. They would recount the stories of their ancestors' miraculous deliverance from 400 years of slavery and harsh labor. They would recite the ancient prayers together.

Jesus took advantage of this gathering to share some intimate teaching about His Kingdom (which they were still struggling to wrap their minds around, because it was in many ways unlike any society they had ever known). He even paused to wash their feet with water, which stunned and embarrassed them.

As they shared the meal He told them that He would give His body and shed His blood for them.

Although they hardly knew what He meant, they must have felt so proud to be His disciples. What other teacher would make such gestures of devotion to his students?

Then they sang a hymn and went out to the olive orchard across the valley to pray. Jesus prayed hard; He wept and cried out to God. But somehow His friends slept while He labored.

Suddenly, there were voices and lanterns as soldiers from the Temple interrupted them and placed Jesus under arrest. There was great confusion and fear, and all the disciples fled the scene.

The next day, to their consternation, Jesus was tried before the Jewish high priest and the Roman governor and sentenced to be executed by crucifixion.

It must have seemed like a dream—stunned and confused, and afraid for their own lives, too, they must have asked, “How could this be? He worked miracles for others... What is happening?”

Crucifixion? That was the worst. A slow, agonizing death. A shameful public display. Fit for a murderer, not a healer!

But it WAS happening. Jesus carried His cross to the hilltop, and was roughly nailed to the wooden posts, and hung to die. Most of them couldn't bear to watch the gruesome scene.

It was an awful day, a brutal day, a strange day—there was an earthquake, and the noontime sky turned dark as night for several hours.

Then, as the light of day returned, Jesus' body was taken down from the cross and buried in a nearby tomb, lent by one of His friends. And the crowds disbursed to their homes. The disciples, too.

There would be no songs or banter that night. Probably no feasting either. Another kind of darkness was settling over them... their Light extinguished, their Hope taken from them. They felt empty, directionless... their future was exposed as shapeless and empty.

Holy Saturday, the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday, was for them a long, long day, as they tried to understand what they did not want to believe.

A day spent in silence, I think, without words, except the occasional outburst of bitter tears. Trying to hold faith in the face of unbelievable tragedy and loss. Emptiness. Formlessness. A void.

Imagine the crucifixion WITHOUT the resurrection. What would that mean? THAT is what they felt that day. It was the end. Not any kind of beginning.

Resurrection

Now, fast forward to today. Here we are on Easter Sunday. What does this day mean to us?

On the day that Jesus died, the earth quaked and the heavy curtain that isolated the Most Holy Place in the Temple was torn, from top to bottom, by some unseen Hands. What happened then? What was the result? The Bible doesn't say...

Until three days later...

Again, the earth shook, and the stone that sealed Jesus' tomb was rolled away by angels' strong hands. Disciples entered the tomb to see what they could find... They found nothing but old grave clothes.

You see, it wasn't what remained inside the tomb or the Most Holy Place that was important; it was what came OUT! It wasn't about the light that was admitted INTO the secret place or the tomb. It was the light that came OUT of that darkness.

The grave could not hold Him. The stone could not lock Him in. Death could not stop Him. Eternal life came out of death that day. A Man had conquered death, and His victory has become the possession and destiny of all who listen to His voice and follow Him.

Death is dark, and formless, and empty.

Unless you know the One who is full of life everlasting.

In the beginning, He said, "Light, be!"

John added more light to the picture we had:

John 1:1 In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

¹⁴ So the Word became human and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.

³ God created everything through Him, and nothing was created except through Him.

⁴ The Word gave life to everything that was created, and His life brought light to everyone.

⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

Later, Apostle John was carried away in the Spirit and was shown the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. He said,

Revelation 21:22 I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.

²³ And the city has no need of sun or moon, for the glory of God illuminates the city, and the Lamb is its light.

John 1:9 This is the True Light that lightens every human life.

What about your life?

Have you torn the curtain that isolates you from God? You're here today because at least part of you wants to. You want His light to lighten YOUR life.

Sin is the only thing that separates you from God—that inward stubbornness that wants to live life on your own terms, even if that means trouble or hardship or suffering. (That’s just how stubborn we are.)

But if you’ll relent, if you’ll repent, if you’ll turn to Christ and ask for mercy, He will forgive you on the spot. He’ll begin to erase the stain of sin from your heart and the shame of sin from your mind, and set you free to live and love and laugh like never before.

The veil was torn...

The stone was rolled away...

The Spirit was poured out...

The Church has been sent out...

And the Lord will return...

All, so that you can live, really live, in the light of God’s love and freedom. So you can let YOUR light shine for all to see.

And that is what Easter is really about.

Will you talk with Jesus right now?

Will you admit you have sinned? Will you turn away from trying to control your world and turn to Him and give Him charge of your life from this day forward? If you will call Him “Lord,” then you may call Him “Savior.”

Ask the Lord Jesus to make His presence known to you and direct your steps from day to day. Ask Him to fill your heart with His love and peace.

And thank Him for reaching out to you and hearing your prayers.

Happy Easter!