

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
The Great Vigil of Easter 2025
Grace, River Forest
4/19/2025

Witnesses Around The Fire

Fresh snow had blanketed the ground outside of Estes Park the night before. It was our last full day there so we wanted to make the most of it. We were going to spend most of the day hiking. We found the trailhead. We were off. Slow and steady. The only problem was that the first portion of the hike was not protected from the elements by the trees. From the start we were kind of lost. We knew what general direction we were heading. Beyond that we were not sure. That is until we began to notice markings in the snow up ahead. Footprints. They belonged to other creatures who had traveled this way before us. After our aha moment we followed the way that they had prepared, and after trudging through the snow, with our heads to the ground, watching for those signs, we were on our way.

It is even harder to find your bearings at night. Without the light of the sun. We miss the clues. It's difficult to see, even right in front of us. Being lost is one thing, being lost at night is something else. Even if there are other creatures, humans or otherwise who have gone ahead of you they are harder to spot.

Before the morning rays pierce the horizon there is space to acknowledge all of the contours and contradictions in the valleys of the shadow that we have been acquainted with. The places where daylight seems like an endangered species.

We've known these places in our own bodies. Death, diagnosis, disease. Things that just happen to us. Aging parents, fractured relationships, dead ends that pile up.

I heard someone say recently, "I feel like a stranger in my own country." Many of us feel lost in the midst of political discourse that gets more extreme and polarizing with each passing day. We hear about people being disappeared without due process and compounding threats that will only hurt already vulnerable communities. Some of us don't know where we are anymore let alone which way to turn.

On this night, illumined by this fire, if you look close you will begin to see the footprints of others who have been here before. Some are etched in the wall in the garden where we began. Some on our hearts. We heard from others earlier. As one preacher says, on this night we hear testimony of the God who acts in the world's midnight, slaves that cross rivers into freedom; dry bones that rise up to live; three young men saved from the fiery furnace of a tyrant. All up ahead.

And Mary. Weeping in the dark outside the empty tomb. Lost and afraid. She hears someone, and before her quaking voice could speak, he recognizes her. Speaks her name. Now she has gone ahead, announcing good news on the way. Her's are trustworthy footprints to follow. Proclaiming that Christ who was dead is alive again.

The vigil is like a gathering of a wise circle of friends around our bonfire of sorts. All the saints are here. Under the cover of darkness we hear of courage and strength. Bravery and vulnerability. Failure and salvation. Death and life. What do they say to us? God is the one who never forgets you. God is the one who always hears the cry. Our God is the living God. One who always promises liberation and freedom. Our God calls you beloved. Like Fredrick Buechner they'd remind us that the worst thing is never the last thing.

Who is in your wise circle of friends, along with Mary, and others? Who is making a way for you? Blazing the trail. Leaving signs along the path. Urging you forward. Julie Hinz.

My great uncle sonny. How about you?

After our brief stop at the fire we are back on the journey. Further ahead you will notice that the one leading the way is Christ himself. He is on the move. Wherever you go he has been there before. You are never alone. He greets you with arms outstretched. He makes a way. Carries you in his arms. He is alive. The most permanent, enduring thing we know, death itself, has now been undone. All under the cover of darkness.

Find your bearings. True north. Home base. This candle. That cross. His body and blood. Jesus Christ from beyond every grave. Life in all the crooked and upside down places. Even in your life.

And then go. Make your tracks. Shine, you pillar of fire, into all the dusty, and dark places. Speak. Cry. Protest. Sing. Proclaim. When not even death itself is the end. All bets are off. You belong to the future. His name is Jesus Christ. Did you hear him speak your name?

You can tell them in the morning: We have seen the Lord.

