

### HOPE ON THE HORIZON

One of the great preachers of our time is Dr. Gardner Taylor. Dr. Taylor pastored Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn for some 42 years. He was a leader in the Civil Rights Movement and a mentor to Martin Luther King. I've heard him preach a few times—he is a commanding presence.

Dr. Taylor also taught homiletics, the art of preaching, at Harvard. One of his students, Timothy George, recalls a story Taylor told in class about his early years as a young African-American preacher in Louisiana.

It was during the Depression, and Dr. Taylor was at a very small country church, that had only recently gotten electricity. The sole source of light in the sanctuary was a lone light bulb, hanging from a wire off the ceiling.

One night, halfway through his sermon, the electricity shut down. It was pitch dark in a way that only the rural countryside can be pitch dark—as poet James Weldon Johnson once wrote—“blacker than a hundred midnights, down in a cypress swamp.” (*“The Creation,” God’s Trombones, 17*)

Taylor, being young and inexperienced, was at a loss. He bumbled about for a few moments, when from the back of the church the voice of one of the elderly deacons cut through the night. “Preach on, preacher! We can still see Jesus in the dark!” (*Preaching Today Audio, Issue 290*)

We can still see Jesus in the dark!

There is hope on the horizon!

That my friends, is the essence of Easter. That is the good news on this festal day. That is the message of our story about Mary Magdalene.

The Gospel of John and the other gospels as well, remind us that Mary had been through the whole experience. She had been at the cross. She had seen his agony. She had watched him die. She had followed as he was taken to the tomb, and witnessed his burial as the sun was setting on that Friday night so long ago.

And though the sun would rise and set again on Saturday, it was as if she entered into a long, dark night that stretched from Friday to early Sunday morning. A night of despair and fear. A night of grief and great sorrow.

Yet, “while it was still dark,” John tells us, she went to the tomb on Sunday to anoint his body with spices, the usual custom in that hot climate.

Some say the great miracle of Easter is that Jesus rose from the dead, that the tomb was empty and that he appeared to Mary and then the others. And that is most certainly true.

But there is another Easter miracle, if you will, and that is this: even in the throes of her own grief, even in the midst of the darkness that must have shadowed her very soul, Mary was still able to see Jesus. Yes, she first mistakes him for a gardener, but in the end, she sees him through the dark night of her grief! She recognizes his loving voice, his healing presence. And when he appears at the dawning of that first Easter, Mary is able to see hope on the horizon. And because of that, she is able to carry on. She takes the good news to Peter and the others, and as she does the light grows ever brighter.

One of the darkest times in our own nation’s history occurred on September 11 and in the weeks that followed. For those of us living here in metropolitan New York, it was especially horrendous as we buried the dead and mourned their loss.

While many were killed at the World Trade Center, some did survive the collapse of the towers. And two of the survivors were NYPD officers Will Jimeno and John McLoughlin. They had entered Tower One to free those inside, just before it collapsed. When it did, they were trapped under concrete and steel.

For ten hours, thirsty and in pain, they waited to be rescued. Gas lines that had been ruptured in the collapse burst into fireballs all around them. Their heat even triggered the ammunition in a dead officer’s gun, sending fifteen bullets whizzing past their pinned down bodies.

“I was exhausted,” recalls Officer Jimeno, “I had done everything I could . . . I just knew we were going to die.” (“Purpose Driven-Life,” *World*, 8-12-06, 26-27)

But then Jimeno had a vision. In the darkness of the rubble, he saw a figure, bathed in light. “He wore a glowing white robe and a rope belt. I couldn’t see his face, but I knew it was Jesus . . . I remember asking [him], ‘If I get to heaven, can I have some water?’” (Ibid)

It was that vision of light in the midst of darkness that gave Jimeno new hope. “I had this resurgence of optimism, this resurgence of the will to fight.” He yelled to his partner, who was fading fast, “We’re going to get out of this hellhole!” (Ibid)

And they did. A few hours later, they were the last two survivors pulled from the Towers.

Most of us will never find ourselves in such a situation. And most of us will never have a literal vision of Jesus. But the light of the Resurrection can and does give us the courage to carry on in the darkest of times. It can and does provide hope on the horizon.

For many people *these* are dark times. The war in Iraq is entering its sixth year. Tibet is in turmoil. Darfur is unresolved. The stock market has gone haywire. Thousands are losing their homes. And recent events have shown racial issues still divide us in America.

All the controversy over comments made by the Rev. Jeremiah Wright, a United Church of Christ pastor in Chicago, has taken a toll on a variety of people including the Rev. John Thomas., the President of our denomination.

John grew up here in Connecticut, and served in a variety of church settings before becoming President of the United Church of Christ. But being President is not the same as being the Pope or even a Bishop. Each and every pastor in the United Church of Christ enjoys what is called freedom of the pulpit. That is, she or he is free to express his or her understanding of the gospel in sermons, classes and so. And every member of the UCC enjoys freedom of the pews. No bishop or denominational official tells pastors what to preach—nor members what they are to believe.

Still, there are those who think it must be otherwise, and so they have chastised John Thomas for how he is handling the situation with Rev. Wright. He has received some very negative phone calls and e-mails, some even calling for his resignation.

In the midst of all this John has been dealing with his own personal concerns. Recently his twenty-five year old son, who serves in the National Guard, was deployed to Afghanistan. I can't imagine how that must trouble a parent's sleep, having a son or daughter in harm's way! And John's 93-year old mother, who is suffering from severe back problems, was just moved into a nursing home, something I know from first-hand experience that can truly upset a family!

One might say these have been pretty dark times for John Thomas. But in a recent letter he sent to UCC clergy and others, John recalled the night one Maundy Thursday forty-five years ago, when he was confirmed, and how that has sustained him in these challenging times. Quoting, St. Leo the Great, he writes "although that day belongs to the past, the power of the mystery that was then revealed has not passed away. . . ." ("Owning the Covenant," Letter from John Thomas, 3-19-08)

For John, the mystery of God's grace, as revealed to us in and through Christ's death and Resurrection has been a power which sustains him, a light that shines brightly, even in the midst of a dark night of concern, worry and difficulty.

**For in the end, that old deacon was right: “We can still see Jesus in the dark.”**

**And though, at times, the night is long, Christ’s Resurrection assures us that there is a crack of light, a shimmer of sunshine, a touch of rose and gold at the edge of the sky. For the tomb is empty. Death no longer reigns supreme. Christ has been raised up, and has shown us that we are each known by name, and called to new life.**

**Maybe, my friend, you are in the midst of such a dark time. Maybe you are facing financial woes, or marital difficulties, or critical illness. Maybe you are estranged from a loved one, or challenged by a relationship that just never seems to work. Maybe you feel like a concrete block is pinning you down. But know this to be true: there is hope on the horizon.**

**You are known by name, and loved by the One who brings life out of death. For Christ is risen! And the mystery of God’s grace, the power of God’s love, lives on.**

**We can still see Jesus in the dark—and Jesus can still see you and me.**

**Amen**

**John H. Danner**