

While It Was Still Dark

Text: John 20:1-18

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on April 4, 2021

One of the gifts of the church is that it confronts us with the Gospel message regardless of what is going on around us. A Bible passage leaves the page and is spoken out into the world, sounding a new harmony or discord with what's happening in any given place and time. And there sure is a lot happening! There is the pandemic, offering us hope on the one hand as more and more people show up for a jab in the arm. But those vaccines are racing against variants that could develop resistance to those very vaccines if the virus spreads more quickly than needles in arms.

Also, as we have relived the passion of Christ this past week, we have also been reliving the passion of George Floyd, with both Jesus and Mr. Floyd calling out to their mothers in their final breaths. We hope for justice; but fear that it will be denied yet again. This Easter brings piercing memories of those who were with us last Easter and are gone from us now, as well as the unimaginable fact that it has now been over a year since the normal ebb and flow of our lives was abruptly stopped around the world. Into this unprecedented "now," the Gospel speaks, inviting us to hear what it has to say in the context of layered crises, hopes, and fears that swirl around us.

The resurrection stories are told differently in each of the Gospel accounts. But as it happens, the lectionary for **this** year on **this** day gives us the resurrection story from the Gospel of John. John is the philosopher of the Gospel writers, and unlike Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John's account of Jesus' life is highly symbolic and multi-layered. In John, there's always more going on than what you read on the surface.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report that some variety of persons went to the tomb early on the first day of the week. Matthew and Luke say it was at dawn, Mark says it was early but notes "when the sun had risen." John alone notes that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, "while it was still dark." Now, if you're really worried about that sort of thing, you can say that Mary went before dawn and others came later, but I think you'd be missing the point. This is John. He is saying something more as he describes the darkness surrounding Mary's journey.

One of the key themes that runs through the Gospel of John is the theme of light and dark. It is introduced in the very first paragraph of the Gospel. John 1:3-5 reads, "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." I think it's fair to say that all of John's Gospel is making that case, and the imagery is used throughout. So, I don't think it's any accident that we have the same theme appearing here at the end.

I don't think that John forgot whether the sun was up yet, and I don't think it's a mere historical rendering of when Mary showed up at the tomb. If *Mark* says it's dark, he means you *physically* can't see. When *John* says it's dark, he means you *metaphorically* can't see, a blindness of soul and spirit. That might be a willful blindness; but it might also spring from the emotions of fear, grief, and despair—the things that cloud our minds and often blind us to the truth in times of hardship, anger, and tragedy.

The last time we saw Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel, she was standing at the foot of the cross as Jesus died. Now if you want to talk about whether Jesus and Mary were married, we can talk afterwards, but it's clear in all the Gospels that they were very, very close. Mary of Magdala is mentioned more than any other woman in the Gospels, and—as an aside—not a single one of those passages describes her as a prostitute, so get that out of your head. Mary Magdalene is there at the cross with only Jesus' mother, Jesus' aunt, and John. She's the first one to the tomb and the first to see Jesus after his resurrection, for which St. Thomas Aquinas named her the Apostle to the Apostles. She's not on the fringe of Jesus' followers, which means that for Mary, as much as for any of Jesus' other disciples, the days have been dark indeed.

She was there at the darkest of them. She watched him die...horribly, brutally, as a criminal. Watching that happen to a person you love when you can't so much as offer a cool cloth for their forehead is about as dark as it gets in a soul. And when she comes to the tomb on that first day of the week, that darkness has not lifted. She's still deep in the grief and horror and disbelief of what has happened. The sun could have been shining brightly...doesn't matter. For her it is dark—midnight with no moon and stars dark.

But John wants to say more than that Mary hasn't had a very good weekend. We're not deep enough yet. John's theme from the beginning is that Jesus is the light of the world, and no amount of darkness can snuff that out. And just as dark means more than physical darkness, light also is symbolic in John. Light is John's symbol for truth—the ability to see things for what they are. What he is showing here in the Easter story, I think, is how Mary's courage allows her to overcome the grief that has blinded her and see the joyous truth that death does not and cannot win. He's showing us how darkness gets dispelled by light; he's showing us how love can give us the courage to open our eyes.

What's always been interesting to me is that not one of the Gospels tells us of the actual resurrection. Nobody records blinding flashes of light, earthquakes, visions, glowing rocks...nothing. Here is this huge, central event and nobody but nobody sees it. Even though Jesus' birth was ignored by the masses, there were still angels singing to shepherds, signs in the night sky that foreign astrologers could read, and a king worried enough about a possible usurper to the throne that he orders a massacre of children. But nobody at all gets tipped off about the resurrection in any of the Gospel accounts. It happened sometime in the night...while it was still dark...and nobody knew until Mary went and looked.

I don't know about you, but I've had some very dark times in my life. And when it's dark—when grief and pain and doubt blind you to what's going on around you—that's the time we're tempted to ditch God and maybe even our own God-given lives. It's easy to think that God's not ever going to do anything to help us, and doesn't give a flip about what happens to us. It's easy to just pull the covers over our heads and give up. It can take an enormous amount of emotional courage just to get up and go out.

But that's exactly what Mary did. Despite her terrible grief and well-founded fear, Mary got up and did something. She went to the last place she knew Jesus was. Even though it was his tomb and she knew darn well he was dead—she had watched it—she went. And in doing that, Mary showed us what faithfulness in the dark night of our souls looks like. When our prayers just seem to hit the ceiling and fall back down on our heads, we go to pray anyway. When reading the Bible is just so many words on a page, we read anyway. When church seems to be just going through the motions with a bunch of hypocrites, we go anyway.

Faith isn't the absence of doubt or fear. Faith is screwing up the courage to step out into the dark—to embrace it even, as a place where hope may lie unseen; where potential may sit unrealized. Faith is the humble recognition that we may be blinded to the truth for whatever reason—that we see through a glass only darkly, as Paul puts it—and to get up and go out into life anyway. But just like dawn is a process, so it was with Mary. She went out into the dark and found that the stone was rolled away. Something had happened. But what? It was still dark and she assumed another horror—someone had stolen the body.

Mary panicked and ran to get Peter and John. They came running. Peter looked inside and saw the empty tomb. Then Peter and John went back home—a baffling response if ever there was one. But not Mary. Again, she stuck it out and stayed put. If it was worse, so be it. If they had stolen the body, she would find it. Mary's love for Jesus was stronger than her fear of the dark. And in her faithfulness, the scene again shifts. With Peter and John gone, she goes into the tomb herself—into the very depth of her horror and fears, and this time there are angels. She turns around and there is someone else...the gardener maybe? But as the gardener speaks her name, the light dawns and she can finally see. It is Jesus. He is risen. Her tears vanish and she goes out in joy as the first evangelist to tell the others the news.

It all happened to her because she was faithful while it was still dark. No matter how bleak and completely impossible the situation looked, she went back to be with Jesus. Even when he wasn't there, she stayed, unwilling to take his absence as an answer. The resurrection had already happened in the night; the dark that she feared had actually contained the fulfillment of the promise. But the reality of the resurrection didn't make the slightest difference in Mary's grief until she screwed up the courage to embrace the dark and face whatever was there. And in the light of her faith, Jesus called her name. The darkness could not overcome the light, blind grief could not overcome the truth, just as John had said in the prologue to his Gospel; and it was Mary who lit the lamp and saw the rising Son of God.

Thomas, one of the other disciples, heard the news, but there was still no Easter for him. He thought it was fake news. Thomas refused to confront the dark for an entire week because he had no proof of what he would find there. That earned him the nickname "doubting Thomas" because he wouldn't believe the news until he could stick his fingers in Jesus' wounds. Jesus gives Thomas what he asks for the next week. But then Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." Blessed are those with the courage to go out in the dark.

Does Jesus mean that Thomas is less loved by Jesus or that God is withholding a blessing from those who need proof? No. The word "blessed" just means "happy." Those who believe without seeing; those with the courage to embrace the dark are simply happier because they learn to see earlier. Mary's joy was the deepest and longest of any of them. She was the most "blessed," the happiest, not because Jesus loved her most but because her love propelled her to go out in the dark and, in doing so, she learned the truth first. The resurrection happened and was there for any of them to experience. Peter and John even went to look, but then they turned and went home. It wasn't the actions of Jesus that were different, it was the response of Jesus' followers that determined when their darkness turned to dawn.

Many of us come to this Easter in the dark. Deadly disease flies in the air; grief is thick; hate, bigotry, and violence cast a pall of fear at home and abroad. We feel a sense of unity with those who share our views on world events but more divided than ever from those who don't. New alliances are made but often at the high cost of once-cherished relationships that now lie in the dust. Economic anxieties for many of us are real and pressing.

In the midst of it all, here comes Easter with John reminding us that the dawn of resurrection comes when we screw up the courage to take our torch of faith out into the dark. In two weeks is the eighth anniversary of the Marathon bombings. We remember that day with the words "Boston Strong," and not "Boston Fears," because in the moment of that horror there were those who ran right into the darkness, saved lives, and brought people to safety. Those who thought God was gone and darkness was forever opened their eyes to find God right there beside them, working through those who brought unconditional love and practical aid. Their light dispelled the darkness.

The resurrection happens in the dark, but it is the light of courageous faith that dispels the darkness and reveals the risen Christ. He's easy to mistake for the gardener, or the healthcare worker, or just the person who puts a hand on your shoulder when your world is falling apart. But if you strike even the smallest match of faith, your eyes will open and you'll recognize the face. And then it's on you to go and tell the others. He is risen. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. In fact, it was the darkness that gave it to us. Amen.