

Sermon for Easter Sunday

April 21, 2019

“While it was still dark”

Isaiah 65:17-25

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

*“Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...”*  
*John 20:1*

Mary Magdalene must have had a fitful night. Perhaps she was unable to sleep trying to sort out all that she had seen the day before and all that she feels. One of the few faithful followers of Jesus present at his execution, she had stood at the foot of the cross through all the long and excruciating hours that were the crucifixion. She watched helplessly as her teacher and her friend writhed in pain and struggled to breathe. There must have been moments when she had to turn away because it was just too painful to watch, but she didn't leave. She must have felt enormous despair, but she stayed until the end. With Jesus' very last breath every hope she had of living in a new world...a world of love and kindness and justice and equality...a world as God had intended it to be...had vanished. And Jesus, her dear friend, her teacher, her guide had been lost to her forever.

We don't know what prompted her to go to the tomb. Perhaps, like us, she wanted to go to the last place she had been with the one she loved. When grief hits, the longing to be with or even to be near the one we have loved and lost is almost overwhelming. In the beginning, there is this part of us that wants to believe that it isn't so...that it didn't happen...that death hadn't come. But she knew it was so. She saw Jesus die. She didn't just hear about it from someone else, so her ability to deny that he had really died was impaired. She was present when it happened. The devastation of his death was more than just that of losing a loved one. His death brought the loss of all she thought she had learned about the nature of God. It challenged all she had come to believe about God. Even Jesus had felt that despair when he cried out from the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Had she heard him speak those words?

Grief and depression and despair are all dark emotions. It was still dark for Mary Magdalene as she made her way to the tomb. A sadness had descended on her that was too deep for words. A darkness and foreboding enshrouded her. Her heart was broken. She probably didn't even know why she was going to the tomb. All she knew was that she had to go. Even though she knew that all was lost, she had to be as near to Jesus as she could get. The tomb was his last resting place. We all know what it feels like in the moments of deepest despair when we feel that God is silent...that God has let us down...indeed, that God has abandoned us. Why did God allow this to happen? Why didn't God stop the unfolding of events that put Jesus on the cross?

Mary Magdalene is not prepared for what she sees when she arrives at the tomb. The massive stone that covered the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away. Even in her grief, she is composed enough to jump to the logical conclusion that someone had moved the stone and stolen Jesus' body. Now she is more distraught than ever. She runs back to tell Peter and the other disciples what she has discovered. They race back to the tomb and discover it wide open just as Mary Magdalene had said. It is dark inside the tomb, but they look inside and find the burial cloths there with the cloth that had been used to cover Jesus' face folded and in a separate corner. They have no idea what to make of what they see. They are in the dark. They have part of the information, but not all of it. They had apparently forgotten that the scripture had said that the Son of God must rise from the dead. It doesn't occur to either one of them that Jesus had risen from the dead and is now alive. And they don't seem particularly anxious to find Jesus' body. They leave Mary Magdalene standing weeping at the tomb and they return to their homes.

In the dark, with no one watching, God had done an incredible...an impossible...thing. He had raised Jesus from the dead. God was...and is...still creating. With the resurrection of Jesus, God had created something new for the world. We now have a bridge between sinful man and loving God that is Christ Jesus resurrected. He is our pathway back to God and into eternal life. And we are reminded of the original creation..."In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was

morning, the first day.” [Genesis 1:1-5] No one was present to see God’s first creation when he created the Light. And no one was present when God created this second creation, the Light that is Jesus and resurrected him. The world has never been the same since Jesus entered it. But none of those closest to Jesus seem to have realized what had happened. All of them are mystified. The disappearance of Jesus’ body was a mystery. And it must have been very distressing to all of them, but only Mary Magdalene seems intent on finding the missing body.

The disciples left Mary Magdalen at the tomb, apparently without a word to her. She is weeping as she is speaking to two angels inside the tomb. When she turns around, she sees a man that she assumes is the gardener and she explains, through her tears, that someone has taken away her Lord and she doesn’t know where they have laid him. When the man speaks to her, he says only her name, “Mary!” and instantly she knows that she is speaking to Jesus himself. During his ministry Jesus had referred to his followers as his flock and he as their shepherd. He said, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” [John 10:27-28] At the calling of her name, Mary Magdalene recognizes the voice of her shepherd, Jesus.

It’s hard to imagine what emotions Mary Magdalene must have been feeling at that moment...Confusion? Joy? Disbelief? Excitement? Relief? She must have been filled with thousands of questions that she couldn’t really articulate, but before she could speak, Jesus commissions her to go and tell the good news to the disciples. Jesus himself ordained her to preach the Good News...He is risen! And she did just that. She goes and announces to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” By Jesus’ choice and designation and direction, Mary Magdalene, a woman, is the first person to declare the Good News of Jesus Christ. She answers the call from her Lord and Master and Good Shepherd.

Resurrection isn’t always easy to see. Resurrection isn’t neat and clean. It’s messy. And we all know that before there can be resurrection, there must be death. In the process of creation, something is destroyed or reconfigured in order to create something new. God continues to create. More importantly, God continues to love us with the same powerful force that propelled his Son, Jesus, into human form to be in the world among us. God comes to us even while it is

still dark. In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul tells us, "But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners, Christ died for us." God didn't wait for us to get it right. God didn't demand that we be sinless before we could be saved. In our most difficult and troubled times in life, God is always with us even if it seems to us that God is being silent. Even if it seems to us that God has abandoned us or no longer cares about us. Nothing could be farther from the truth. When St. Paul wrote to the church at Rome, he said, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." [Romans 8:38-39] That declaration itself is good news.

Jesus is the Light of the World...the Light of the World that dispels the darkness. Jesus Christ is the Love of God in the world. Darkness does not and cannot overcome light. In the darkest of moments...in the darkest of times...keep the flicker of your faith burning and the darkness will not overcome you. Hold fast to the light and that love that overcame death for your sake.

For he has risen! Jesus Christ has risen indeed!

And we and the world will never again be the same.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.