

Gospel

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

*I have seen the Lord*

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb." Our Easter Gospel begins this morning in the dark. The horizon may be displaying a pastel purple hint of the dawn that will come, but the sun is not yet in view. Mary is walking to the tomb of Jesus in the dark. Her eyes are glued to the ground that she cannot clearly see. Each step she takes is a bit unnerving – is the ground even? Is that a root? Is that a rock? Are those stairs? The trip to the tomb of Jesus is not a familiar path and the only thing that compels her feet to step surely is her heartfelt need to be close to the body of her Lord. Mary Magdalene and the other women who were Jesus' disciples followed him throughout his life and right up to the foot of the cross. They watched in horror as Jesus, the Lord of life, the Son of living God, was killed upon the cross. They stayed at the foot of the cross until the clouds of darkness descended and covered Golgotha in a funeral shroud.

Three days have passed since darkness covered the land. The sun must have risen a few times, but Mary has not noticed. The Lord of light has been extinguished and she walks to the tomb in the shadow of death. When Mary reaches the tomb, the sun has come up enough for her to see that something is not right. The stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. Here in the valley of the shadow of death, evil has come and defiled the tomb of Jesus. Mary's grief is now accompanied by shock and rage. Who could have done this thing? Who could have robbed the grave of Jesus? Surely, the sun has crested the horizon, but with each passing moment, the future looks darker and darker. It

was hard enough to see Jesus die, but now Mary fears that further defilement will come to his body in death.

Mary runs to Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. Her feet fly fast and sure but her mind is clouded and a storm is brewing in her heart. "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." I imagine that the three of them looked at each other through red and bleary eyes, exhausted with grief and fearing the worst. The men run back to the tomb with Mary to see the terrible news for themselves.

It is just as Mary described. The stone is rolled away and the body is not there. Peter ignores his rapidly beating heart and ventures recklessly into the tomb, the very womb of death, to have a look around. He notices that the linen wrappings have been left behind. The cloth from Jesus head is carefully rolled up and set aside. This is strange. Ordinary grave robbers would not have taken the time to unwrap Jesus' body. Robbers work quick and dirty under the cover of darkness. They have to be faster than the light that is pursuing them. It is strange that someone with evil intentions would so carefully unwrap the body they mean to defile. No one understands what it all means, but they do believe that Jesus' body is gone.

The men leave Mary standing at the empty tomb. They go home full of a jumble of emotions and Mary stays to weep and be alone. She came to be with the body of her Lord of love and now even that has been taken away. Grief upon grief, darkness upon darkness, tears upon tears. How much loss can the human heart endure before it breaks?

This sea of darkness and grief is where the resurrection is revealed.

I know that you all got up this morning basking in the light of sun, hoping that it would not only light your path to church, but warm up this chilly Easter day. Perhaps, you have shared some Easter gifts of candy or painted eggs? This is a day of celebration! A day to put on our Easter clothes and challenge the cold. A day to proclaim new life. In our household, Cameron assures me that the main focus today is the Easter Egg Hunt after worship. It is hard to imagine the darkness that Mary is feeling when we are surrounded by the splendor of spring blooms. If you journeyed with us through Holy Week worship, perhaps you knelt before the foot of the cross on Friday night, while the church was dimly lit and the choir chanted anthems of adoration. Then you got a taste of the darkness before the dawn.

For Mary and the disciples, the darkness has not yet been lifted. As a Christian community bound together by 2,000 years of proclaiming the resurrection, we know that Christ is risen! The Lord is risen, indeed! But Mary has not yet seen the Lord. John's gospel begins the first Easter morning in darkness because even though we may have heard about the resurrection, it is always when we journey through the valley of the shadow of death and fear the evil surrounding us that the resurrection is personally revealed to us. We weep, we cry out, we run to our friends in despair, and when we think our heart might break apart – an angel asks us, "Why are you weeping?" We pour out the pain of our grief and loss in heartfelt prayer and Jesus asks us again, "Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?"

Just like Mary, we can look right at Jesus and not recognize him through the veil of human darkness. Mary decides that she is looking at the gardener of this desolate valley and pleads with him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." But this is no gardener. This is no hired hand. This is no stranger. The good shepherd has come to gather the first of his lost sheep. "Mary." He calls to her. "Mary, I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. I know my sheep by name and they will listen to my voice. I will lead you to green pastures, I will take you to still waters. I will restore your soul. Fear no evil, for I am here with you, always. I am here to carry you out of this darkness. I am light, I am life, I am love, I am the good shepherd, I am the resurrection."

Mary hears the sound of the shepherd's voice and she turns away from the darkness and faces the light of Christ. "Rabbouni!" She cries out, "My teacher! Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no evil, for you are with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." The darkness cannot continue in the presence of the Light of Christ. The desolate valley outside the tomb is transformed by life and light. The heavy stone of the tomb and the dead wood of the cross have become a garden bursting with green and flowering life. Mary Magdalene would like to hold onto Jesus and be sure that her shepherd will never be taken away again. She reaches out to capture the light of Christ for herself, but instead, Jesus gives her another vocation. He calls her to help with God's plan to spread the light of Christ and conquer the darkness of death and despair. Jesus sends Mary to be the apostle to the apostles, "Go to your brothers and sisters and tell them what you have seen and heard, tell them about the resurrection." Share the good news that on this day, the Lord of life has risen up from the grave and conquered the darkness of death. Our God is the God of light and life, and nothing can overcome God's power to bring all of creation through the grave of death into a garden of abundant life.

For the last 2000 years, the light of Christ has been proclaimed by the church, the Gospel story has been told again and again, year after year, so that you might know about the resurrection. Just like Mary and the rest of the disciples, we will experience darkness in our lives at some time or another. And it will be in those dark tombs that Jesus will call out your name. Audrey, Howard, Nicole, Joe, Larry. The good shepherd knows each of us by name and we know the sound of his voice. Joe, Dennis, Robin, Isa. The good shepherd invites us to turn away from the darkness and look into the light of Christ. Becca, Nancy, Barry, the good shepherd invites us to return to the waters of baptism and discover new life, lived in the unfailing light of the resurrection. And so I invite us all to renew our baptismal vows on this Easter morning, that we might hear Jesus calling our name as we continue our Christian walk- led by the good shepherd, a path clearly illumined by the light of Christ.

*Renewal of Baptismal Vows*