

Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022
“While It Was Still Dark” (John 20:1-18)

Friday evening, we held our Tenebrae service. If you were here, then you know that the altar was shrouded in black and that the service of shadows ended in darkness and silence. This morning, however, you came to church anticipating the color white: white altar paraments, white banners, white lilies. You anticipated not darkness, but brightness. You anticipated hearing the organ carry the joyous strains of our favorite hymns to the rafters. What we have discovered, then, is this: Easter may lead to the light, but it begins in the darkness. Easter may ultimately be about things that are bright and clear, but it begins in things that are dark and murky.

John tells us up front that, for Mary Magdalene, the day that would eventually become Easter begins *while it was still dark*. This is important to note because how we get to Easter influences the Easter we experience. In other words, the setting from which the resurrection emerges shapes what the resurrection means.

In John’s gospel, the resurrection story is told in a non-dramatic, somewhat understated fashion. In fact, until the very end of these verses, what we find among the main characters of the story is not jump-up-and-down Easter joy, but head-scratching confusion and even heart-wrenching sorrow. Most of chapter 20 is subdued, matter of fact. It’s not because John failed to notice the vital centrality, wonder and joy of the resurrection. He did. So, the reason for shaping his story in a non-triumphant fashion must lie elsewhere. In a moment, we will ponder that.

But to begin, let’s simply take note of the story as it unfolds through John’s narration. We begin while it is still dark on that first Easter morning. Mary Magdalene finds enough light to make out her way to the tomb. It’s not clear in John what she intends to do when she arrives there, but, most likely, she goes to mourn, to weep, to pay her respects. We have all done that at the grave of a loved one or friend, haven’t we? Therefore, we can perhaps identify with the emotions swirling through Mary’s mind just then.

But if today we came up to a grave, only to see mounds of freshly dug-up dirt surrounding an open hole, we would immediately suspect foul play and grave robbery. Jesus wasn’t buried in the ground, of course, but in this case, the stone that has been rolled aside indicates to Mary the same thing an open grave would signal for us: someone has been tampering with this tomb. Mary doesn’t investigate any further. She doesn’t think she needs to. It’s obvious what’s up. So she runs for help. In general, there is a lot of running in this story, but it’s mostly frightened and confused running.

Anyway, she tells Peter and John what she has found and they go to check out Mary’s terrible news. They investigate the matter more thoroughly than Mary, confirming not only that the stone has been moved, but that the tomb, itself, is empty except for the burial wrappings. And there is something odd about that. The burial wrappings are both still there – and neatly folded. The most obvious and logical reason is grave robbery, but who ever heard of a neat burglar? If you go home some evening to discover that a robber had been in your house, you would expect to find a mess. A burglar is not going to take time to straighten up. He moves quickly to avoid being

caught. So, when Peter and John find everything neat and tidy, it becomes unlikely that this is a grave robbery.

We are told that John observed all this and *believed*. But just what does he believe at that precise moment? That Jesus has been raised from the dead by the miraculous power of God? No. The text makes it clear that they don't even consider it a *possibility* at this point, much less believe it. It seems likely, then, that what John believes is simply what Mary had reported to them earlier: that Jesus' body is not where it had been placed. And since a grave robbery seems to have been ruled out, something funny is going on.

In any event, whatever conclusions are drawn at the moment, the two disciples simply go back home. Again, isn't this a striking way for John to tell this most important of all Bible stories? Not one single emotion is described. They just go home, leaving Mary to weep by herself in the garden.

Again, the text began *while it was still dark*. But no matter how much higher over the horizon the sun has crept by this point in the story, there is a metaphorical sense in which the darkness persists. The very first emotion we have described for us is one of sorrow. Mary is bawling her eyes out. But for John, THIS is where Easter begins: in darkness, in confusion, in the shadow of death.

But then John's story turns toward brighter things. Eventually, Mary sees the risen Jesus, but she mistakes him for a stranger. This seems to be the case in most post-resurrection accounts. Our Lord's physical body has been transformed so that no one recognizes him instantly. Here, it is only when Jesus calls her by name that Mary recognizes who is standing there in front of her.

The rest of the story flows from here. Mary Magdalene becomes the first ordained evangelist in history as Jesus authorizes her to go and preach the good news to the disciples – which she does. However, the disciples don't seem to take her very seriously because, in the verses following today's text, they are still sitting there in the upper room. Even so, Mary's sadness has definitely been lifted, and no one can say anything to her to make her question who it was she had met that morning in the garden.

We do see a little excitement here from Mary, but everything is still pretty low key. In John's gospel, Easter doesn't so much *burst* onto the scene as it *creeps* onto the scene. It emerges from the darkness and the confusion, from the death and the sadness that has set this chapter's tone. So, why does John present the story this way? Sometimes, stories that are embellished with a lot of details seem like nothing but tall tales. John could have jazzed it up a bit, but his stark and somber telling of the story gives it an authentic quality, one that fits into our world and our lives in the world. The way he tells it, Easter slowly emerges from the darkness of death, the shadows of confusion, and the sorrows of this sad world. And that's exactly where we need Easter.

We need Easter to bring light to the darkness of war and terrorism in our world. We need Easter to brighten a world that continues to live in the shadows of a global pandemic. We need Easter to bring healing and wholeness to the sick and dying. We need Easter to cast its joy on our

loneliness and sorrow, to bring us comfort when we stand at the casket of a loved one. We need Easter to give us hope when life closes in and our burdens seem too much to bear.

John opens his story with the words, *while it was still dark*. This speaks to each and every one of us because darkness is certainly a part of our lives. Sickness, worry, sadness, and death constantly lurk in the shadows of our world. But here's the good news of the gospel. Easter still creeps up on us in the darkness! Easter comes for those who, like Mary, find themselves crying their eyes out in despair, hopelessness, and confusion. The triumph of God is real. Jesus lives, and because he lives, it is life and not death, light and not darkness, joy and not sadness that has the last, best, and most glorious word. For that reason, God is worth every alleluia we can muster this morning and any day.

John, you see, gives us an Easter that fits us, an Easter we can take home with us when we leave here this morning. Think about it. If this were the only setting where Easter could thrive – here amidst the jubilation of the organ and the shining brightness of paraments, banners and lilies – who among us could take that back home with us? This is not a valid representation of the world in which we live. There are no chimes joyfully playing when we come home from a long day at work. There's no swell of organ music when we're caring for a sick child or aging parent. There is no crescendo of choir voices when we've lost our job and the bills are piling up. There are no smiling faces and pleasant greetings when there is tension and discord among family members. What we experience here today is not part of our routine, everyday lives. That's why John gives us good news we can live by and also live with. Because somewhere in the shadows of your life and mine, a truly risen Savior is lurking, bursting with new life.

Even while it is still dark, the good news of Easter is ours. It's here. It's now. Jesus is here now, and he knows your name and mine. No matter how deep the darkness may seem, may we listen for that voice calling our name – because he is calling. To each of us, he says, *I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of light.* So, let us boldly proclaim. Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed. Alleluia!