

Easter Begins in the Dark

Our Sermon text for today is from John's Gospel Chapter 20:1-18

Easter was born in the dark, and it comes still to the darkest places of our living, especially this year, to bring us into the wonder of God's loving light.

If you were an artist and someone asked you to paint an Easter picture, I know where you would begin. Almost certainly, you would begin with *light*. Somewhere in your picture you would show the sun just breaking over the horizon. Of course, you would. That's why so many churches have a sunrise service on Easter Sunday. It's the very essence of the day. This feeling is so deep that we expect nature itself to cooperate with us. If Easter dawns overcast or raining or snowing, we somehow think God has forgotten what day it is. And then, this year, with this world-wide pandemic there is gloom all over the world. Easter is supposed to be bright, cheerful, overflowing with life. Dark, gloomy weather, and this year, fear, sickness and death, empty streets, empty stadiums, empty train stations and airports make us think this might be the end of the world. We know that's the way it has to be; we may not like it, but we know it's appropriate. But Easter means life. That's the proper order of things.

But logical as that may seem, it isn't the way the Bible tells the story.

Remember how our scripture lesson of the day begins? "Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb."

The man who wrote the gospel of John was an artist with words and images.

He wasn't using words casually when he began his report on the first Easter by telling us that "it was still dark." Like a master dramatist, he was setting the stage for us, preparing us for what was to follow in his majestic story.

You see, John — who gave us this gospel — emphasized the theme of light and darkness throughout his book, beginning, in fact, with the very first paragraph. There he tells us that God's Son came into the world as *light*, and that this "light shines in the darkness," and that the darkness is never able to overcome it. But now as we come to the end of John's story, it looks as if the darkness *has* overcome the light. Jesus, the Son of God, has been tried in court, beaten, humiliated and crucified, then laid in a borrowed tomb. He is dead, so when one of his devoted followers, Mary Magdalene, comes to the tomb, she comes in the dark.

As far as Mary Magdalene was concerned, it wasn't simply the darkness of early morning. In truth, with **the death of Jesus**, the light had gone out of Mary's life. Some months before — perhaps two or even three years before — Mary had been living in perpetual darkness. Whether it was noonday or midnight, sunrise or sunset, it was all the same to Mary Magdalene, because she lived in darkness. We don't know details about her story, though we're tempted to draw up a kind of soap opera script. It was commonly said that the poor woman had seven demons. This was the first-century way of saying that Mary was full of the devil. Evil had so overwhelmed her life that she seemed bent on self destruction. Hers was a life lived in darkness.

Then one day — we don't know where or how or when — she met Jesus of Nazareth, and he cast out the demons that obsessed and possessed her, and on that day her darkness became light. Where previously people may have avoided her because of the eerie sense of foreboding that marked her, now they wanted to be near her — because to be near Mary, now that she had encountered Jesus, was to be in the light.

Now a radiance shone from her. It isn't surprising that when we read about her in the gospel stories, she is so often the first one mentioned. I suspect that she was a “natural leader” now that the light had come into her life.

But that was before the soldiers took Jesus and the courts unjustly condemned him, and the crowds shrieked for his blood. That was before they took his beautiful body — now a pathetic, crumpled mass — and laid it in a tomb.

Now Jesus was gone, and the light had gone out of Mary's life. No wonder, then, that the gospel writer says that when she came to the tomb, it was *dark*.

I'm quite sure that John intends to tell us more than that the sun hadn't yet risen. He isn't simply talking about clock time; he is giving us a description of the state of Mary's mind, and of the minds of all Jesus' followers. Indeed, if I may say so, he is making a poetic, philosophical statement about the very state of the human race. It was *dark*. As dark as hell. We may feel that way, this year!!

I want you to come with me for a moment or two, farther back in the story. In fact, as far back as the beginning of our human recollection, as the Bible tells it. Come to that time when the Bible says that humanity was living in a garden, a paradise, the Garden of Eden. It was there that the human race went wrong, and Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden, under the sentence of death. And the human race has been under that death sentence ever since.

That is, there was this darkness in the world. Whatever joy life might bring, there was always an end to it. Whenever there was a celebration, whether it was a wedding, a birth, a victory in war or a harvest festival, you knew it would come to an end. So, too, with human relationships:

No matter how much you loved someone, you couldn't keep that person forever, because either the person would leave you or you would have to leave that person. That's what death is all about. Some philosophers taught that it was better that we should never love anybody, because to do so was only to build ourselves up to the bitter disappointment of losing that person — either because that person would die or because we would. Death had come into our world, and with death had come darkness. No matter how lovely the light that any day or any event or any person might bring, darkness would eventually destroy the light.

So, John's gospel has it right when it tells us that when Mary Magdalene came to the tomb that morning, it was dark. It was dark for Mary, as I've already said, because the light of her life, the one who had broken into her darkness

some months before, was now gone. Darkness had won again! It always did, it seemed. As far back as Mary could remember, darkness had always won. Now it had won again. So, she came to the garden in the dark.

And when she got there, she discovered that the tomb was empty. This didn't make her think a miracle had happened. Rather, she reasoned that some cruel, vicious person had stolen Jesus' body. Mary must have thought the darkness had grown deeper than ever. So, she ran to tell John and Peter. They came to the tomb and then returned to their homes. But Mary stayed there. By then the sun had already risen, but Mary was still in the dark.

And as far she knew, so was the whole world, the whole human race. It was still in the dark, just as she was.

There in the darkness, Mary wept. She heard a voice (it must be a gardener, she thought), asking her why she was crying. Mary explained that apparently someone had moved Jesus' body, and she asked the man where they had taken it. And the voice answered, simply, "Mary," and at once Mary knew that it was her Lord. And that's when the darkness rolled away. For Mary, and for the whole human race. That's when death lost its power, and life won. That is when the power of darkness was broken, and the Light of God reigned supreme.

This is the great, good news I bring you on this Easter Sunday. Easter was not born in the sunlight; Easter was born in the dark.

And it still comes to us in the dark. This year, in the midst of much suffering across the world and in our county, I invite you to be open to the ways the mystery of Christ's dying and rising intersects with our lives, even as we are physically separated from each other and we are not together in our sacred space. And remember we are united with the Church around the world, as most Christians will not be able to assemble in person this morning.

So, into this dark place in our lives — however fearfully dark that place is - Easter comes there, in the person of our living Lord. Because when the power of death was broken by the resurrection of our Lord, all the power of darkness was broken, in all the other dark places of life.

And then we have our own personal darkness, maybe of some habit that you can't break? Or perhaps thoughts you hate to acknowledge even to yourself? Or is your dark place simply that collage of unfulfilled dreams, or a loneliness so deep that sometimes it constricts your heart? Or is it fear — fear of someone, of some memory, of death itself?

Whatever the darkness, I want to tell you that the same Lord who came to Mary Magdalene so long ago stands ready on this Easter Sunday to come to you, to expel the darkness from your life by the very power of the eternal Light that is in him.

That's because Easter was born in the dark, and wherever there is darkness, Easter comes still to bring its magnificent light.

By God's grace, may it be your light today. Even today. May the glorious RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST live in your hearts today – For this is the Day the LORD has made, let us REJOICE and be GLAD in it. Amen!