

While It Was Still Dark

John 20:1-18

Resurrection of the Lord/12th April 2020

It all feels wrong. It's not the same. We're missing our pews packed with people singing, "Alleluia!" There's no sharing the joy of the day together with others who share our joy. I can shout "Christ is risen!" But there's no crowd in this sanctuary shouting back at me, "He is risen indeed!" Instead of a brass quintet, we have one trumpet player. Instead of a choir, we have one soloist. There are no children running around in their Easter best with Easter-basket-sugar-highs. At least we have beautiful Easter flowers today giving life to the space. But for the most part, the sanctuary is empty. It feels sad. Even the pews are in mourning, missing all the people. It feels hollow. Vacant. Sparse. Strange. Weird. Wrong. We are a church, a people scattered.

And yet, if you think about it, empty sanctuaries on Easter morning bear greater resemblance to the setting that first Easter morning—a place of absence. There were only a handful of people at the tomb, not a crowd. In many respects, this Easter feels closer to what it must have been like that first Easter. No trumpets. No choirs. No shouts of "Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!" The disciples were still recovering from a grueling, traumatic, emotionally devastating week. Fear. Anxiety. Worry. Shame. Abandonment. They watched their teacher and Lord, their *friend*, get arrested and wrongfully charged, humiliated and shamed, and then watched his violent, gruesome death, the death of their teacher and Lord, their *friend*. It was a dark and grim week.

According to John, Mary Magdalene, racked by grief and yet motivated by a fierce desire to be near the body of her Lord, went to the tomb. She was awake early. Only John tells us that Mary set out *before* dawn. Not when light was breaking or at "early dawn," as Luke says (Lk. 24:1), but "while it was still dark" (Jn. 20:1). At night. John is specific, he's *always* very intentional with his words. He wants us to know this. "Early on the first day of the week," John says, meaning between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., "while it was still dark" (Jn. 20:1). It's important to John and it should be to us. Mary's encounter with resurrection begins "while it was still dark."

And when she gets to the tomb the darkness doesn't go away. It's intensified. She's thrown into a different kind of darkness. She sees and yet she cannot see. She sees the tomb—did she have a lamp or a torch?—and by some source of light she discovers that the stone had been removed. She runs to Peter and an unnamed disciple, "the one whom Jesus loved" (Jn. 20:2) we're told, she runs to tell them. "They have taken the Lord," meaning the Lord's body, "out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (Jn. 20:2).

Consider this: Mary's lost in double-grief. She lost him first on Friday, this man whom she loved and who loved her, and now she's lost him again.

"They" she says. One person cannot easily move a dead body. In the dark, confused, concerned, she assumes the worse. Wouldn't you?

Thomas Lynch reminds us—Lynch is a funeral director and author who writes beautifully, movingly, with a wry sense of humor about daily encounters with death and loss, as a Christian—he says, that as general rule, dead folks don't do a lot for themselves. They can only have things done to them.¹ And that's where Mary's thoughts go.

She didn't go to the tomb in the dark expecting him to be gone. And she certainly didn't expect him to be alive. Sure, Jesus talked about rising again, but Jesus said a lot of things that were confusing and not especially clear to his disciples. She wasn't looking for resurrection. It wasn't on her horizon of expectations. As T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) said, there are things, "Not known because not looked for."²

She runs for the guys and when they get to the tomb, they're just as perplexed and confused. No one's sure what's going on or what's going to happen next. It's chaotic and disordered. Their lives have been upended and they don't know by what or whom or for what reason. They have a look around and then they leave Mary there all alone.

Crying. Weeping. Heartbroken. She finally goes into the tomb. And then I love how John phrases this: "As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb..." (Jn. 20:11). That's when she really sees what's missing. "As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb..." It's her grief and her love for Jesus, it's her sorrow and eros that lead her to look into the tomb. She doesn't run from her tears or fears. They guide her deeper *into* the darkness. She sees the place where the body once laid. She sees the graveclothes. And she gets to see something the other guys don't see: two angels sitting where the body was placed, one at the head and the other at the feet.

Mary doesn't seem too bothered by the fact that she's seeing angels and having a conversation with them. She doesn't seem perplexed by this at all. She doesn't think it odd. Grief and sadness have a way of changing our perceptions of reality, of what is true or not true. Everything gets distorted, confused. We're open to anything. It's already been an odd day, so why not angels too?

But now, at least, someone bothers to ask, "Woman, dear one, why are you weeping?" Finally, someone honors her feelings and her grief. "They have taken away my Lord..." Again, we don't know who "they" are, but it doesn't matter. They have taken away her love.

And it's at that moment, in the depths of her sorrow and grief, unable to see clearly what's going on around her, confused by darkness and despair, that Jesus arrives. He kind of sneaks up on her. He doesn't startle or surprise her, but quietly stands there. That's how the Resurrected One often shows up in John's Gospel. He sneaks in behind closed doors to disciples locked away in fear (Jn. 20:19-25). He appears from out of nowhere and fixes breakfast for his friends on the lakeshore and they don't recognize him at first (Jn. 21:4-14). "Not known, because not looked for."

Mary confuses him for the gardener. "Woman, dear one, why are you weeping?" He speaks to her with profound respect. He doesn't say, "Stop crying." He doesn't judge her. Instead, in love, he asks her to put words around her grief. That's what you do for someone you truly love; you help them put words around their grief.

“*Mary!*” he said. “*Mary!*” And then all becomes clear. Shadows slowly begin to scatter. His voice a light that pierces the darkness and brings her back to herself. There’s nothing like hearing your name said by one who really loves you. It lights up your soul. His familiar voice a light that calls her by name because he loves her, in calling out her name, he calls—not unlike Jesus calling Lazarus out from his tomb (Jn. 11:38-44)—calls her to step out into his light, the light of a new day,
a new life,
a new joy,
a new way.

You see, that’s what the power of God’s undying love does. That’s what God’s undying love can do. And *that* —that’s what resurrection means, that’s what resurrection does and continues to do!

In John’s Gospel, Jesus says, “I have come as light into the world, so that everyone who believes in me should not remain in the darkness” (Jn. 12:46). And go back to the beginning of John, in his sublime prologue, we find these words: “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” (Jn. 1:3b-5).

For, resurrection has a way of emerging from within darkness. And that’s good to remember during these days that are dark, and the news is grim and we’re daily confronted by the numbers, confronted by death and heartbreak and human suffering and loss and overwhelming grief and we are anxious and afraid. So much is coming undone, unraveling all around us. The world will never again be the same for us after this pandemic, we will never again be the same, which in some might respects might prove to be a good thing.

While it was still dark...

While it was still dark...Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.

On this odd Easter morning, may we, like Mary, rediscover or perhaps discover for the first time, there is a light that shines in the darkness, a light the darkness can never overcome. There is a voice that illumines *our* darkness and *our* grief. There is One who knows *our* name and calls us to step out, step into the light of a new day.

Christ is risen! Risen indeed!

Thanks be to God!

¹ Thomas Lynch, *Bodies in Motion and at Rest: On Metaphor and Mortality* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2001), and *The Undertaking: Life Studies from the Dismal Trade* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009) and

² T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” *Four Quartets, The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1962), 145.