

Out of the Darkness

John 20:1-18

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Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
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I have heard of one former pastor who served this church long ago who used to welcome people on Easter Sunday by saying that he looked forward to seeing them again on Christmas Eve, the implication being that this is one of the two days that many people will come to church each year. I don't care if that is the case with you. I welcome you, one and all, in the name of the risen Lord Jesus Christ. The truth is, if there is a day above any others that one ought to come to church, today is that day. For you see, the truth we proclaim today with such pomp and circumstance is the truth that defines us as followers of Jesus Christ. It is a simple, straightforward proclamation that we make today: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

That's the gist of it: Christ is risen. Technically every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection, but we set aside this one Sunday every year to make a special point of celebrating the resurrection. And I'm glad we do, because Easter is my all-time favorite day of the year.

Resurrection is, if we are honest, a bit hard for modern people to swallow. I'm reminded of the time when a little boy went to church for the first time—and it was Easter. When he came home his parents asked him what he had learned. He replied: “Aliens came from outer space, lived on earth for a while, and then left. God is one of those aliens and after death we go in a space ship to live with God.”

His parents looked at each other incredulously, then they asked him: “Are you sure that's what they told you?”

“No,” he replied, “But if I told you what they really said, you would never believe me.”

When you think about it, the events of that first Easter are pretty unbelievable, aren't they? There is a tomb, presumably with a large stone rolled across the entrance, yet the stone has been inexplicably rolled away. We have reports of earthquakes and angels and Roman soldiers guarding the tomb. And most curious of all, we have unanimous witness to the absence of a body. John even goes to the trouble of telling us that Jesus' grave cloths were situated exactly where a body would have been, as if the body somehow evaporated from underneath the cloths.

Truly, the events of that day are difficult for modern people to wrap our minds around. Especially in this day and age, when so much emphasis is placed on that which is rational and can be explained with sound science, the thought of a resurrection is something with which many are not very comfortable; it just doesn't make sense.

But that's okay. Because today we don't need to put an airtight doctrine in front of you to satisfy your intellect. Today is about something that transcends anything we can wrap our minds around. The

preacher's task today is not about offering you a scientific proof of the resurrection; it is, instead, about proclaiming what the resurrection means for you and me.

Carlyle Marney once spoke on the campus of Duke University. When a student asked Dr. Marney to speak about the resurrection of the dead he replied: "I will not discuss that with people like you."

"Why not?" the student asked.

"I don't discuss such matters with anyone under thirty," Marney replied. "Look at you, in the prime of life—never had you known honest to God failure, heart-burn, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?"¹

I'm not sure I agree with Marney's assessment that anybody under 30 wouldn't have a sound understanding honest-to-God failure, heartache, defeat, brick walls, mortality. But he does have a point: you really can't appreciate the true meaning of the resurrection if you don't begin your understanding in the darkness.

That's where we find Mary Magdalene in this morning's text from the gospel of John. John says that it is "early on the first day of the week, while it is still dark..."² The story of the resurrection begins while it is still dark. It was dark, because the sun had not yet risen. But for Mary the true darkness was the death of her Teacher and friend, Jesus. Mary could've gone to the tomb at the height of the midday sun, and it still would've been dark, because just two days earlier she had witnessed the death of the one in whom she had put all of her hope.

I think you probably understand something of how Mary felt, don't you? Certainly most of us have had some experiences that have propelled us into the darkness. Surely you know what it's like to have your hopes tampered with? Maybe it's because you woke up one day in October and you discovered that you no longer have enough savings to retire, that you'll have to keep working at that job you so badly want to leave behind you. Maybe it's because of that phone call you received from the doctor's office—you need to come in right away, because the doctor has to tell you about that spot on the x-ray. Maybe it's because one day you heard a knock at your front door, and when you opened the door you were met by two soldiers in full uniform, and they had news about your son in Iraq. Maybe it's because someone whom you love dearly has told you that they are no longer able to return that same love back to you.

I think you probably understand something of how Mary felt, don't you? Certainly most of us have had some experiences that have propelled us into the darkness. You can't truly experience resurrection until first you have experienced the darkness.

Sometimes we're tempted to think that the message of Easter is that God takes away all our pain and our sorrow, and that everything will be great from here on out. Sometimes we're tempted to think the message of Easter is that we get back everything we've lost, just like it was before.

But that's not what resurrection does. Resurrection doesn't keep us from having to pass through the valley of the shadow of death, but it does mean that we aren't traveling through that lonesome valley by ourselves. Resurrection doesn't suddenly take away our sickness, but it does transform our experience of sickness. Resurrection doesn't necessarily help us understand why bad things happen to good people, but it does help us to understand that God is still in the midst of us working for the good.

1 Carlyle Marney is quoted by Robert Ferguson, Jr. in a sermon, "The Wager of Your Life," on the Lectorary Homiletics website: www.goodpreacher.com

2 John 20:1

Easter is about transforming our despair, about piercing the darkness with the light.

Toward the end of our Easter text, Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb, searching desperately for Jesus. Her initial discovery of the empty tomb has not brought her comfort, as it did the beloved disciple; instead, it has added salt to her wounds and compounded her pain. And it is in her desperation to find the body of her friend that Jesus comes to her. Only, Mary can't recognize Jesus through her tear-swollen eyes. But then something happens: Jesus calls out her name—Mary! It is Jesus' speaking the name of Mary that sparks recognition and awakens Mary to the reality of the resurrection, that Jesus is not dead, but alive. And that's when the despair stops and hope is born again. That's when the darkness begins to fade, as the light begins to dawn.

Don't you see—resurrection is not simply a fancy word that explains why the tomb was empty. Resurrection is the experience of the presence of the risen Lord! More than just the realization that Jesus has somehow defeated death for himself, resurrection is the promise that in his defeat of death, Jesus now comes to you and me, and he calls us by name, and he transforms our tears into joy, our mourning into dancing.

Jesus didn't conquer death for his own benefit. He conquered death so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. He conquered death, not just so we could know that death isn't the last chapter in his story; he conquered death so that you and I can rest confidently that death and darkness and pain and sorrow and confusion and despair are not the last words in our own stories—that through the risen Christ the last words of our stories are words of comfort, and hope, and victory, and divine love that conquers all.

But again, resurrection is not a restoration to the way things were before. If you go back to the story of Mary Magdalene and Jesus at the gravesite, you'll notice something peculiar. In her recognition of Jesus, Mary calls out "Rabbouni," which is Jesus' title of Teacher, Rabbi; it is as Rabbi that Mary had known Jesus before. But Jesus keeps Mary at arm's distance: "Don't hold onto me," he said, "because I have not yet ascended to the Father." It is as if he is saying, "Mary, don't hold onto the way I was in the past, because everything is different now. There's no going back to the way it was before. The hope I give you is not about turning back the clock—it is about transforming your life from here on out."

Craig Barnes put it this way: He said, "What we long for, what we miss and beg God to give back, is dead. Easter doesn't change that. So we cannot cling to the hope that Jesus will take us back to the way it was. The way out of the darkness is only by moving ahead. And the only person who can lead the way is the Savior. But not the old Rabbouni we once knew, which is only one more thing that has to be left behind. Until we discover a new vision of the Savior, a savior who has risen out of our disappointments, we'll never understand Easter."³

We get so caught up in doctrine and theological arguments, that we lose sight of what is important at Easter. Whether or not God could conquer death never really was an issue. The gospels don't ask if in our minds we can comprehend the resurrection; the central question the gospels lift up for us is, In your heart of hearts, have you experienced the presence of the risen Lord—Have you seen the Lord?

John doesn't tell us anything else about Mary Magdalene. But we get the idea that life for her didn't return to normal. She had seen the Lord; even more, the Lord had come to her and had transformed her grief and filled her with hope.

3 Craig Barnes, "Savior at Large," *The Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002, p. 16. www.religion-online.org

After the resurrection, things aren't normal. They can't be normal anymore. Even the darkness is different now. Because there's a savior on the loose. And he's not far from you; even more, he's with you wherever you are.

And he knows your name.

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.