

Living Easter
March 31, 2013

John 20:1-18

For those of us who practice the Christian faith, the resurrection is the central, monumental event of history.

Even for those Christians who don't focus as much on an historical event as they do on the spiritual truths of it, for all of us, the message of resurrection is the absolute center.

Of course it was the central message for the disciples as well, and the story is recorded in all four of the Gospels. But to say that all four report it is not to say that all four tell it the same way.

The Gospel of John has a number of differences, and one of those in particular I think is helpful to think about.

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all report that some combination of people went to the tomb early on the first day of the week. Matthew and Luke say it was at dawn, Mark says it was early but notes "when the sun had risen."

John alone notes that Mary Magdalene went to the tomb, "while it was still dark."

Now, if you're really worried about that sort of thing you can say that Mary went before dawn and others came later, but I think you'd be missing the point.

When Mark says it's dark, he means you can't see. When John says it's dark, he means much more than physical darkness. The sun could have been shining brightly... it doesn't matter. For Mary it is dark, dark, dark.

But John wants to say more than simply indicating that Mary hasn't had a very good weekend. His theme from the beginning is that Jesus is the light of the world, and no amount of darkness can snuff that out.

What the writer is showing, I think, is how Mary lives out that hope and what happens as a result.

Of all the Gospel writers, John is the philosopher. John's Gospel is highly symbolic and multi-layered. It almost never means only what the words on the page say.

There are symbolic themes that run throughout. John's Gospel was written much later than the other three, and there are those who say that it was meant as a commentary on the other three...that Matthew, Mark, and Luke will tell you what happened and John will tell you what it all means.

So with all that in mind, let's take a closer look at John's account of this event.

The writer tells us that early on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb. Then she goes to tell two other disciples – Simon Peter and the “one Jesus loved” – who themselves come to the tomb.

This “disciple that Jesus loved” has been the subject of a great deal of study, theories and speculation. Many say the reference is to John, and there are a number of other thoughts that I won't take time to go into this morning.

So Mary tells Peter, and the unnamed disciple. These are the ones closest to Jesus, and yet none of them yet understands the significance of what they are witnessing.

John goes on to tell us that after Mary sees the angels in the tomb, she sees Jesus himself. She doesn't recognize him at first. Not until Jesus calls her by name does she know who he is.

She thinks at first he has returned as he promised, and now he will stay with her and the others, resuming their former relationships.

But Jesus says, “Do not hold on to me” (Jn 20:17). Instead, he commands Mary to go and prepare Jesus' disciples for that coming of Jesus when the Spirit will be given.

But before all that, as they approach the tomb, the disciples – first Mary and then the other two – are in the darkness of fear and pain. They are grieving their crucified Lord, and they are afraid.

Mary says, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him” (20:2).

We, too, experience pain, grief, and death in this world. There is plenty of suffering. We can turn on the television to see it up close.

I would venture to say that most, if not all, of us here have had some dark times in our lives. We all know pain in our lives; it is part of the human experience.

And when it's dark and you can't see what's going on around you because there's too much grief and pain and doubt, that's the time we're tempted to ditch God - believing that God's not ever going to do anything or help us, believing that God doesn't care a thing about what happens to us.

It's easy to just pull the covers over our heads and give up.

But Mary has something to teach us in those times. She went to the tomb while it was still dark. Despite her terrible grief and probable fear, Mary got up and did something. She went to the last place she knew Jesus was.

Even though it was his tomb and she knew without question that he was dead...she had watched it...she went. As useless as it was, she needed to be where Jesus was to give her comfort in the dark.

Mary shows us what faithfulness in the dark looks like. When our prayers just seem to hit the ceiling and fall back down on our heads, we go to pray anyway. When reading the Bible is just so many words on a page, we read anyway.

When church seems to be just going through the motions with a bunch of hypocrites, we go anyway. We go to the tomb...to the place where we last saw Jesus...while it is still dark.

And then comes that time when we discover that God has been at work...even in the darkness. It wasn't in the papers or on the news. Nobody saw it happen, but things are different. The tomb that we expected to stink with rotting flesh has been swept clean.

There's panic...what has happened? Is this the other shoe dropping? Is something worse now adding to our dark misery?

Mary panicked and ran to get Peter and the other disciple. They came running and saw the empty tomb. Then they went back home. But not Mary.

Again, she stuck it out. If it was worse, so be it. If they had stolen the body, she would find it. Mary is not afraid of the dark. She is determined that she will find Jesus in it.

And in her faithfulness, the scene again shifts. Again she goes into the tomb and this time there are angels. She turns around and there is someone else. The gardener maybe. But as the gardener speaks her name, the light dawns and she can finally see. It is Jesus. He is risen! Her tears vanish. Her prayers are answered and she goes out in joy as the first evangelist to tell the others the news.

And it all happened to her because she was faithful while it was still dark. No matter how bleak and completely impossible the situation looked, she went back to be with Jesus.

Even when he wasn't there, she stayed, unwilling to take his absence as an answer. And Easter dawned.

Of course, the resurrection had already happened in the night. But the reality of the resurrection didn't make the slightest difference in Mary's grief until she summoned up the courage to go out into the dark and face whatever was there.

Christian life is like that. We meet Jesus at some point...some earlier, some later. We enjoy life with him...the food he provides, the healing, the teaching, the acceptance of us as we are. But then there comes a time when it all seems to go up in smoke.

We question everything. Our spiritual lives are dry. Life hits us hard and Jesus seems dead and helpless. There's no point, we think. It's over. He wasn't what I thought he was. He can't save me after all...he couldn't even save himself. Darkness descends.

In those times, listen to the witness of Mary. "So what?," she says. "He is my Lord, dead or alive. If a tomb is where I must go to be with him, then that's where I'll go."

And you go and you weep and you fear it has gotten even worse. But then...out of the dark...someone calls your name. And you know it...you know the voice. He is alive! The stone is rolled away. The dawn has come. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. It cannot overcome it. It never has and never will. Life and light make the whole world new.

That's what happened for Mary. She saw Jesus himself, the first apostolic witness of the resurrected Lord. She saw that Jesus had passed into a different reality; something new was taking place.

Yes, suffering is real, whether it is caused by overt decision, cowardice, disease, or the power of nature. And death comes to us all. But God's power triumphs over the realities of human life and death. We don't stop with Good Friday; we live on to Easter Sunday.

This good news affects far more than our individual lives. The hope brought into the world by the resurrection touches our whole world, and the cosmos itself. God's power is the real power – power over evil and power for good.

So we can look at our lives, even at the struggle and pain of life, through Easter eyes. It's as if we were color-blind before and now can see the glorious colors brought into the world.

The colors of Easter eggs and Easter baskets, Easter clothes and flowers remind us not only of spring but also of the new life Christ brings us.

We can live our lives with a new perspective. We can build on a new foundation, even when the buffeting in this life begins anew. We will be "rooted and grounded in love," as the apostle Paul says.

When we live our lives founded solidly on the hope provided by this Easter story, we will be prepared for even the hurricanes of life. And they will come, as assuredly as hurricanes will continue to come to the Atlantic Coast.

Yet the storms of life cannot destroy us, because God's power is stronger than they are.

But that Easter experience comes from being faithful in the dark. Thomas, one of the other disciples, heard the news, but there was still no Easter for him. He didn't believe it. He didn't really believe that the darkness could not overcome the light.

Easter didn't come for Thomas until a week later when Jesus showed up and allowed this man we've come to call "doubting Thomas" to stick his fingers in Jesus' wounds.

Only then does Thomas acknowledge the reality of Easter. Jesus says to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

And what about you this morning? Is it still dark in your life? Dark times come to everyone...even to Jesus. Darkness is not a sign that you have no faith. Darkness is the opportunity to show your faith, just as Mary did.

Darkness is the time to get up and face those fears head on...to go to the tomb.

It is the time to recognize that Easter happened in the dark. When everybody was depressed and thought the work of God was a sham, God was doing the greatest work of all.

So get up...go to the tomb. It's empty! He is alive, and if you stick it out, he will speak your name. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.

Who are you in this story? Are you Peter and John, who come running to see and then just go back home without having met Jesus? Are you Thomas, who simply refuses to believe the news? Are you Mary, who refuses to let Jesus get away from her and is the first to know the joy of Easter morning?

God's action was the same for all of them. The resurrection was there for any of them to experience. It wasn't the actions of Jesus that were different, it was the response of Jesus' followers that determined whether the joy of Easter came early or late.

So what did the disciples do? First, we see Mary; she went and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." In the same way, we, too, can share the hope we receive in Jesus Christ.

We can proclaim to other people that "I have seen the Lord" – no matter what we see in the newspaper or on television, no matter what our very real concerns are about our nation, our world, our community, our jobs, and our families.

Polly Berrien Berends wrote a little poem entitled "A Secret," which says, "God means good" "God means good" says to us that God's power triumphs over evil and death. It means that none of the realities of this life, which weigh so heavily upon us, will ultimately prevail.

It's "a secret" because we can't touch it or grasp it. "Do not hold on to me," Jesus said to Mary. Proclaiming the resurrection does not mean we marshal scientific data to "prove" anything. This is a secret of faith.

We can't see or taste or touch Jesus. We see him with our Easter eyes, with the eyes of faith, and faith can be every bit as concrete in its impact on our lives as things that can be measured or weighed or put in the bank!

This secret is one that must be told, proclaimed, shouted, and celebrated as we do today, this Easter Sunday.

As we receive this hope, we must share it with others in a world that increasingly needs hope. Let's tell the secret as we make it real in our own lives.

The Easter story isn't one that we set away on a shelf after giving it a yearly reading. The Easter story becomes our story, as we affirm the great gift God has given us in the new life Jesus received and offers to us.

Through this story in our lives, in the face of the worst that life can offer, we can affirm God's goodness and power.

Let me call each one of you, whether you're here every week or once a year, to commit yourself to the one whose good news we proclaim – to Jesus Christ our resurrected Lord.

Make this story yours, let it renew your lives. Share the story as did Mary and Peter. "I have seen the Lord," said Mary.

I pray that today, in this place, so have we. Jesus Christ transforms our lives and our world, despite the sin and suffering, despite our own failures. This new life offers us the power of hope. Thanks be to God!