

Easter – 2016

While it Was Still Dark

John 20:1-18

The story of that first Easter, as found in the Gospel of John, finds Mary Magdalene headed for the tomb. Other accounts say it was a group of women. In John's account it says something very significant. John says "While it was still dark..." I know it was in all likelihood meant by John to be only a reference to the time of day, but I believe it might also have expressed what Mary was feeling.

Mary had been with Jesus for a long time and experienced all the varied emotions Jesus' life and teachings brought out in others. She had seen lives made new, bodies healed, and eyes opened. She had also heard the complaining of the disciples and the criticism of the religious leaders. She saw how the crowds adored him and the rulers hated him. She had seen the adoration of the people when they entered the city on Sunday and their hostility when they stood before Pilate at the end of the week screaming for his crucifixion. She was one of the few who stood under the cross as they killed him, hearing the taunts of the leaders but also the love of Jesus as he provided for his mother. In the end her heart was broken and she probably felt it was all over. She may have thought, "The least I can do is anoint the body with spices. Everyone deserves a proper burial." Sadness, disappointment, and emptiness had been her companions since Friday. It had been a good three-year run, but now it was over. Her heart was heavy and "it was still dark in her soul and in her life."

That empty, forlorn feeling is perhaps like the feeling that political campaign workers have when their candidate has lost. Someone has to go back to the office and pack up the stuff. There is still work to be done but with no future. Or think about a team after losing in the playoffs. The season is over, no championship for them, and the only thing to do is to clean out the lockers and head home. Let's face it. We all have our days when we stand with our dreams in shambles around our feet. Our children go astray. We get the pink slip from our employer, or the test comes back from the lab as positive. This happens to everyone and we think, "Why me, Lord? My life was going so well and

now this darkness.” We know what that phrase, “While it was still dark,” means because we have lived into its reality. We wish it were not so, but we have all felt the crushing weight of loss and disappointment, just like Mary as she journeyed towards the tomb.

However, a close examination of the text reveals something helpful. When it was yet dark God was at work in her behalf. God was making a way where there was no way. Have no doubt about it, when things get tough, and they will, it does not mean that God has abandoned you. When the darkness comes upon you, God is still working on your behalf. She didn’t know it, but the light of hope and possibilities was going to soon dawn in her life. Just as it was true for Mary, it is true for us. God is at work in the darkness bringing light and life to your life. Mary could sense the dawn coming, that time when night gives way to the day. The same thing was happening in her soul’s darkness as well. She just didn’t know it. Yet, her faithfulness in the darkness was what allowed her to experience the joy of Easter. If she had not felt the need to do this last act of kindness she would have missed out. This is a reminder to us all. When it is still dark in our lives we have to continue doing what we think we can do, trusting in God. Even when we do not feel that presence, even when we feel crushed by life, we need to continue doing the loving things our faith calls us to do, believing God is at work. It is only in this way that we position ourselves to embrace the dawning new possibilities God has in store for us.

What we must all learn, and it is a very difficult lesson, is that it is easy to believe when we are walking in the sunlight of joy and blessings. It is very difficult to believe when the darkness surrounds us. It is easy to believe when life is good, but when it turns sour the natural inclination is to feel rejected or guilty or perhaps angry. Anyone can believe when walking in the sunshine; only the faithful can walk with faith in the dark. In fact, if you have blood in your veins and skin on your bones, you will have some darkness. No one’s life is all sunshine.

I have been a pastor long enough to know that there is heartache in every pew and that most of us suffer in silence. No one is immune to heartache. Rich or poor, we all carry our own bag of rocks; rocks of grief, of guilt, and of pain; rocks of

disappointment and loss. In her darkness, Mary is ministered to. She is first confused by what she sees. The tomb is empty and the body is gone. Even though she is witnessing the power of life and love over darkness and death she does not grasp it. She runs to tell the disciples that someone has stolen the body. It seems that the darkness has deepened.

At times this is how we experience newness of life as well. We begin to see signs of life but the changes we would have to experience, the things we would need to let go of, the independence we might have to give up all seem so overwhelming. Often, only as we look back, can we actually see how wonderful instead of scary those turning moments in our lives were.

Yet Mary remains faithful. She follows John and Peter back to the garden. She remains there even after they leave. Her actions are a symbol of a kind of stubbornness that we all need at times. She realized something had happened and she was not content to just throw up her hands and go on. She wanted to figure out what had occurred and in that struggle, her life goes in a different direction. She meets Jesus and at first thinks he is the gardener. Finally she hears her name spoken only as one would say it. The light dawns, the darkness flees away. Jesus is alive! Jesus calls her to go and tell the brethren. Note that his first command as the resurrected Christ is to tell a woman to go preach to his disciples. She becomes an apostle to the disciples. She is to let others know about the power that rolled away the stone also rolled away her darkness.

We too must trust that the power that rolled away the stone in front of the tomb will roll away that which keeps us in darkness. Yes we might be confused by the events of today. Some of the things happening might make no sense. But if we hang in there, believing God is at work in our lives, that Easter's dawn will happen, we will not be disappointed. We too will find new life, new direction and hope.

As believers, we have difficulty acknowledging that the same power that rolled away the stone that covered the mouth of the cave where Jesus was buried can roll

away the stones that have plagued our lives. The power of the resurrection will dispel our darkness and enable us to live resurrected, empowered lives.

Winston Churchill was invited to speak to a boys' school in England during the most difficult days of World War II. He simply said these words, "Never give up, never give up, never, never, never." After this he sat down. When it was reported in the papers, it became the mantra for the British people during the darkest days of the war.

The message Mary was to proclaim is ours. She was to proclaim that Jesus was alive. He had been resurrected. Death had been defeated. No longer must we live in darkness. The light had come. No matter what your darkness, trust, never give up, never give up, believe God is at work and someday you will see how darkness turned to day, despair to life. This is our faith.