

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24, John 20:1-18
Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Evie Macway
April 9, 2023

From Darkness to Light

It was dark when Mary arrived at the tomb that morning. Dark in the physical sense. There was just enough morning light to guide her to the tomb where Jesus' body lay. She had to step carefully through the garden at such an early hour. But the darkness around her was only a fraction of the darkness Mary knew that morning. The loss and the pain of the last few days almost swallowed her with grief. As she walked through the garden her mind must have alternated between the 'whys' and the 'if onlys' and the simple, raw pain of grief.

But it was her darkness that brought her to the tomb that morning, to check on the body, to make sure things were as they should be. To look once more at the place where they had laid him, to confirm once more that it really had happened. To do *something*.

We recognize the darkness that was Mary's that morning. We have lived or are living through darkness of our own. We know the feeling of grief and loss and darkness that comes with crumbled relationships, hopes vanquished, ravaging injustice, anxiety that gnaws at our hearts and minds, life not being what we had expected or hoped it would be.

The gospel writer of John so eloquently reminds us that it is in this familiar darkness that the Easter story *begins*. "While it was **still dark**, Mary came to the tomb..."

Baptist pastor Kathy Donley sums this up well. She writes that the message of this day is:

"When we are in the dark, because of grief, loneliness, and heartbreak, when we are bewildered, and perplexed, feeling abandoned by God and by friends, this is the good news:

the resurrection unequivocally,

emphatically,

definitively

declares
that death and despair cannot,
do not,
will not,
*have the last word.*¹

We began worship this morning with the lit candle. As I mentioned, last Thursday evening we shared our Maundy Thursday/Tenebrae service. For the first portion of the service we celebrated the Last Supper. We then moved into a Tenebrae service, also called a ‘service of shadows’. We heard 9 brief readings from scripture that recounted the betrayal of Jesus, his abandonment and his grief. With each reading a candle was extinguished until finally we heard, “Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.” And he breathed his last.”

At the end of the service the final candle, the Christ candle, was extinguished, and we ended the service in darkness and silence, with the weight of death heavy on us.

We began this morning with a lit candle and the words from the beginning of John’s gospel, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it!”

“Death and despair, cannot, do not, will not have the last word.” This is our Easter good news. This is what we celebrate today.

Like Mary, we come from our darkneses. The darkness is a part of us, as it was for Mary that morning. Death and despair may reign, in fact they often do reign for a time in our lives.

We come to the tomb feeling the burdens of loss and pain, relationships lost, health failing, uncertain futures. Uncertainty, injustice, tragedy, and life simply not the way it was suppose to be. Like for Mary, at first look, the empty tomb makes no sense in the world we know.

It is interesting. In John’s version of the story we see two reactions to the empty tomb in the garden that morning. First comes Peter and the other disciple. The

¹ Donley, Kathy, In The Dark, *Lectionary Homiletics*, Vol. 25, Num. 3, Apr./May 2014, pg. 29.

story tells us that when they ran up breathless to the tomb they saw that it was empty and that the grave clothes were neatly folded. With this, the story says, at least one of the two men, ‘saw and believed’. We do not know exactly what he believed. It is unclear.

The story goes on to say that as yet they did not understand, so belief and understanding and faith have not completely come together for these two, but it seems there is something about that empty tomb that clicked for them. I imagine the pieces beginning to fit together in their minds. In this moment some new light is shed on all they have learned and experienced with Jesus. It is part of the process. For many of us belief, the faith we carry, is built on moments like this. It is a process, a collection of moments. Sometimes things click into place and it carries us.

And then there is Mary. Mary is still weeping. The empty tomb has not touched Mary like it did Peter and the other disciple. She is still lost in the darkness and pain. Even meeting the angels and the one she supposes is the gardener do not shake her free from her grief.

And then Mary hears him say her name. And everything changes. For me this is one of the most touching moments in all of scripture. It is when Jesus **calls her by name** that Mary can see what she could not see before. Through the fog of her grief and pain, Jesus says, “Mary!” And she recognizes him. In that one word she knows he is there with her. It is not so much that Mary knows who Jesus is but that Jesus knows Mary.

This is the power of the resurrection. God calls us by name. In our moments of death and grief. The resurrection is not only something that happened some how, some way, 2000 years ago. It is something that happens **every day** as we hear God call our names. In the voice of a friend. In the eyes of a stranger. In a community gathered. In an intuition that tells us to change direction. In feeling that tells us to stay the course. In forgiveness we find ourselves able to give. In forgiveness we find our selves able to receive. Death and despair are not the last word, ever. Jesus calls our names. You and me and us.

This is why we gather today. To peer into the tomb and remember and celebrate what we believe. To hear our name through the sobs of our griefs. To look into the faces of the people we see in the pew next to us or on our computer screens and know that Jesus calls them as well. To celebrate the power of God’s love and remember that death and despair cannot, do not, will not, have the last word.

Dr. Susan Garrett, a professor of New Testament and former dean at the Louisville Presbyterian Seminary where I went to school, published an article in *Presbyterians Today* entitled, *The Problem of Evil: What does it mean to claim that 'Jesus is Lord' in a world where so many bad things happen?* in which she talks about evil and how God works in the world. In it she says that God's power is resurrection power. She writes:

“God's power is the power to create, the power to endure, the power to forgive, the power to love. God's power is resurrection power. It is the power of life. Such power, freely given, is God's answer to the problem of evil, until that great day when all creation is set free from its bondage.”²

This is the message of Easter. This is why we gather today. To witness and to bear witness to the resurrection power of God we see in Jesus Christ. We come to listen for our name this day, in the music, in the glorious colors of the flowers we share, in the voices of the people who make up our church family.³

“the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it!” The love of God will reign, does reign. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! And that makes all the difference.

² *Presbyterians Today*, March 2005, *The Problem of Evil* by Susan Garrett, pg. 25, <http://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/today/evil/>

³ *Journal for Preachers*, Vol. 28, Issue 3, Easter 2005, “*Who Are You Looking For?*”, Catherine Taylor, pg. 31.