

Hope Grows best in the Dark

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Easter A

2014 Fort Hill Presbyterian Church

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Prayer: Almighty God, by the power of your Spirit, roll away the stones of our hearts and reveal the Word of Life, Jesus the Christ, to us. Amen.

John 20:1-18

20:1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb.

20:2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

20:3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb.

20:4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

20:5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

20:6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there,

20:7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

20:8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed;

20:9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

20:10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

20:11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb;

20:12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

20:13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

20:14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

20:15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

20:16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

20:17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'

20:18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Proclamation of the Word

John tells us important details in this passage. He begins "early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark." Resurrection happens in the darkness and in a graveyard. Darkness is where the discovery of the Risen Jesus always begins "in the dark." Earlier in the week Mary had stayed at the foot of the cross, not really knowing what was going on, but she stayed along with some of the women. All she knew right now was that Jesus was dead, dead and gone. He had been mercilessly crucified, and with him her hope had died.

And just like her, earlier this week hope died for others.

Earlier this week, the family members of Malaysian Flight 370 heard the dreadful news, there is no hope. Parents of High School Kids from South Korea heard the news of the ferry sinking. Too few survived.

Earlier this week, a man was told to clean out his desk today, his job was being downsized. As he cleaned out his desk he wondered what he was going to tell his wife and kids.

Earlier this week, a teenager watched all her friends having fun on Spring Break as they posted photos, and she felt miserable that her family never went anywhere and her family struggled to keep the lights on.

Earlier this week, a call came from the Doctor that a mass showed up in the report.

Earlier this week, someone heard, "I wish you were never born."

Earlier this week someone's hope died, and darkness overcame their world.

Easter might be most real to those who have spent some time in the darkness. Hope is unseen in the darkness, but that is where it grows best. Easter is bigger than bunnies, jelly beans, and new outfits. The Resurrection is God's big word of HOPE shown in Jesus. God is a God who stands on the side of life and overcomes death. God is not dead. Life goes on.

But God also dwells in the darkness. God is not afraid of the dark.

As Mary walked the dark road back to his tomb in the nighttime, memories of happy days in Galilee flooded her mind. There was so much possibility back then as Jesus spoke and acted. Their spirits lifted and so many were drawn to him. That is where the seeds of Hope started to grow.

He did speak some confusing words about leaving them and sending the Holy Spirit, but this was surreal. Surely it was not to have happened like this, Mary thought as she walked back to tomb. She recounted the events of the past week. She still could not believe that Jesus was tried for treason to Rome and called a Blasphemer by the religious leaders. She was still experiencing something like post-traumatic stress syndrome after witnessing the crucifixion. She had not left the cross or eaten. She was on edge already and sleep deprived. When she arrived, she was shocked. Jesus was missing and surely someone had taken his body. She didn't know what to do with herself, so she just stared running. She ran back to the disciples and told Peter, the default leader. So Peter and the beloved disciple take off for the tomb with Mary right behind them. They were running around in confusion and were distraught. Grief does this to us. Trauma does this to us.

Dying Churches do this in times when the church is losing status or members. In their grief they display hurt and anger. They fight with each other. "Look busy," they tell themselves, we will feel like we are still alive and vibrant. Afraid of the dark, they immerse themselves with just keeping the lights on. They want to hold onto the way things were rather than letting go to see what God will raise up.

People do this at the death of a loved one if they are not frozen in shock, they may start running around dealing with arrangements and details, forgetting to eat. “Keep busy,” they tell themselves, “then I won’t have to think about it.” I will not have to feel.

Mary begins weeping so hard, she cannot see straight. Then she sees angels and a gardener who speaks to her. And the man says her name- and that is when it clicks. This is Jesus- *Rabbouni*- her familiar name for him. Relieved and excited she grabs hold of him. You are here, she thinks. We can go back to the way things were.

And then to our surprise, he says to Mary, “Do not hold onto me.” What?

It is as if Jesus is giving Mary a reality check. “What was is gone. Your *Rabbouni* is no more. I have more to do. You have something important to do. Go and tell the others that I am ascending to the Father.” It seems abrupt and even unkind to me at first blush. But Jesus is saying that chapter is over and the new has come. We do not get to manage God or hold on to Jesus because God is still working his purposes out. The cycle of life and death and new life must go on.

Craig Barnes expresses this well when he writes, “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 darkness is only by moving ahead. And the only person who can lead the way is the Savior,”ⁱ

Jesus, the light of the World, light in our darkness.

Weeping. Loss. Suffering. Darkness. Those are hard places to be. So many have been there recently and still live there. Jesus has been there, too.

So we remember those who have been betrayed, just as Judas betrayed Jesus.

We remember those who bear crosses:

Those in prison

Those who grieve the loss of a loved one

Those at war

Those who face abuse, harm, and hunger.

Our suffering planet herself

We recall those who have descended into hell as Jesus did.

We know there are those whose hell is an addiction, an illness, being trapped in poverty, hatred and bitterness, what the bible calls a "hard heart," or the hell of depression and despair. Next Sunday we will offer a time of Healing Prayers for those who wish to be anointed and prayed for as our Prayers of the People.

That is why it is important to realize that "while it was still dark, Mary came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been rolled away." It was out of darkness that hope came to life. Jesus became real and present. We live in a culture that wants to avoid suffering and even deny death, offering us ways to put off old age or telling us to be "happy, happy, happy" all the time. But God teaches us in the journey of Jesus that God enters into our suffering, even takes on the suffering we inflict on God and one another, to show us the way to new life.

For the gospel of John, it appears that the question is "Do you believe?"

For many churches the question is, "Can you explain the historicity or doctrine of the Resurrection?"

But Mary does not receive a doctrine, or a truth test from Jesus. Mary encounters the risen Christ who calls her by name. Sure, she will have to let go of him. But she will preach the first Easter sermon when she goes and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

And this reality begins while it is still dark.

Have you ever found yourself lost in the dark? Maybe you are there right now. Sometimes it is by living through the darkness, that we catch glimpses new life. Hope springs to life even if the darkness seems overwhelming and impossible to take. God dwells with us while it is still dark.

John's gospel telling begins, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God..." In the dark chaos of creation, God dwells and creates all that sustains life on this earth. God meets Abraham in the darkness. Jacob wrestles with the angel in the night. God's cloud covers the Children of Israel on the Exodus journey as a fire lights the way in the night. The angels speak to Mary in the dark of night to announce the coming of

Jesus. The Shepherds are the first to hear of his birth in the dark and told to follow by the small light of a star. And the poet writes in the Psalm...."I will give you songs in the night."In the dark times of Exiles, the prophet Isaiah 45:3 speaks for the Lord, "I will give you treasures in darkness and riches hidden in secret places so that you will know that it is I the Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by name."

O for certain, Mary is never the same. She will live in a new normal. And so will we. But that new normal means that Jesus sits on the right hand of God. And we are cared for even though we walk through the valley of the shadows of death. We do not have to fear evil for God is with us, his rod and staff, they comfort us. And even while it is still dark, we know that surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our life and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes darkness this way in her new book, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, this way.

Darkness is shorthand for anything that scares me- that I want no part of- whether because I am sure that I do not have the resources to survive it or because I do not want to find out. If I had my own way I would eliminate everything from chronic back pain to the fear of the devil from my life and the lives of those I love. At least I think I would. The problem is this: When, despite all my best efforts, the light have gone off in my life, plunging me into the kind of darkness that turns my knees to water, I have not died. The monsters have not dragged me out of bed and taken me back to their lair.

Instead I have learned things in the dark that I could never have learned in the light, things that have saved my life over and over again, so that there is really only one logical conclusion, I need the darkness as much as I need light."ⁱⁱ

You see, the way out of the darkness is not going back, but moving forward through it. Loss and suffering eventually give birth to hope. Oh, for certain, there will be a "new normal." The Bible makes that clear, nothing is ever the same again. That is the good news. The good news of the gospel is not that you will be rescued from the darkness,

but that as you trust God there, you will be surprised by someone who looks like the Gardener.

When suffering comes, we emerge on the other side and realize,

Whew! we made it. We are not alone. The risen Lord, who had been present on earth, is present with us by the power of the Holy Spirit. We will emerge from the darkness. We might be surprised when our feet will set to dancing and all we hear is a chorus of Alleluias! The Lord of Life is risen! And he knows our name.

Charge and Benediction:

Receive the good news: Christ is risen from the dead.

Tell the Good news: The power of death cannot hold onto us.

Live the good news: We are set free to love as he first loved us.

ⁱ Craig Barnes, *The Christian Century*, March 13-20, 2002 p. 16. The shape of this sermon follows his comments. He put an order to my thoughts on darkness and hope.

ⁱⁱBarbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, (HarperCollins: New York) 2014.

For further reflection on growing in faith in the Dark read St. John of the Cross, *The Dark Night of the Soul*
<http://www.amazon.com/Dark-Night-Dover-Thrift-Editions/dp/0486426939>