

Easter Sunday 2021
Bishop Kevin L. Strickland

John 20:1-18

20Early 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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.



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Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

“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.”

Early in the morning, while it was still dark. . .

Each Easter Sunday, growing up for me; that is exactly how it all began. It was always early in the morning, while it was still dark. The entire sanctuary at Mt. Tabor Lutheran Church was pitch dark. People packed into the pews. You could hear the rustling of butts moving out of the way, people whispering among one another, and the not so quiet “ouch” when someone’s, already too tight new Easter shoes, were stepped on, and the potent smell of lilies.

Then from the very back of the sanctuary, the pastor holding the paschal candle high among the crowd would croon loudly and proudly, “Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!”. And then all the collective breath, waiting, and wandering of Lent was unleashed. The lights came up, the organ bellowed and the church sang. Amazing how showing up all together in the dark, at the tomb, all to be amazed that not even death can entomb God---or us.

“Early in the morning, while it was still dark....” That’s where Easter really begins. It begins in darkness. It begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty. The creeds and clarifications we cherish nowadays came later. What came first were many variations on the same theme I heard at the conference: hope in the midst of struggle. As in: here’s what happens when ordinary people brush up against an extraordinary God. Here’s what it looks like when broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn.

Writer Debbie Thomas states: “When I was growing up, the key Easter fact to proclaim was that Jesus rose — physically, bodily, literally — from the dead. As long as I believed in the historicity of the resurrection, I was safe. Later, as an adult, I encountered other versions of the Easter narrative. The resurrection was a metaphor in these versions — not a literal, historical fact, but a potent symbol of transformation, renewal, and rebirth. Whether or not Jesus physically rose again didn’t matter — his friends and followers experienced his continued presence, and that was enough.”

The fact is, the resurrection happened in total darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight illuminated the event. No human being witnessed it. And even now, two thousand years later, no human narrative can contain it. It exceeds all of our attempts to pin it down, because it’s a mystery known only to God. Whatever the resurrection was and is, its fullness lies in holy darkness, shielded from our eyes. All we can know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow, from the heart of loss and misery, God enacted salvation.

In our Gospel story, Mary Magdalene sees Jesus first because she chooses to remain in the darkness. Peter and the beloved disciple leave when they see the empty tomb, but Mary stays, bewildered and bereft. As Nadia Bolz Weber puts it, she “remains present to what is real, to what is actually happening.” She does so even when what is real feels unbearable.

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In my own life, I am finding it increasingly true that clarity, hope, and healing come when I am willing to linger in hard and barren places, places where the usual platitudes fall flat, and all easy answers prove inadequate. Jesus comes in the darkness, and sometimes it takes a long time to recognize him. He doesn't look the way I expect him to look. He doesn't let me cling to my old ideas. He disappears again just as I grab hold of him. But he comes, he calls my name, and in that instant, I recognize both myself and him.

Each Easter, the preacher's role comes across as difficult or burdensome to come up with a creative, appealing, catchy Easter sermon, in some ways to make it new.

But what's wrong with the old news about Easter? What's wrong with saying that first sermon that that early female preacher, Mary, was so eager to shout?

The old news about Easter is that it is about resurrection. The new news may be that it is not so much about the resurrection of Jesus as it is about our own. Unfortunately, we so often miss it.

Jesus, you see, is already gone from the tomb. The only question now is whether we are willing to abandon our own, leave the old trappings behind and live in the light of Jesus, the Christ, whom the religious authority persecuted and politicians condemned.

It's at the tomb that we discover things about ourselves. It's at the tomb that we come to make sense of the questions that have bogged us down these weeks of Lent. At the tomb they all come together in one great, blinding awareness.

Locked in the tombs of life or shackled behind doors of fear may feel easier than living in this Post-tomb, post-Easter world.

When we lock doors though; it is not just to keep things from coming in; it is also about keeping things from going out. When we lock the doors of our hearts or of our faith or of our churches from being the nail scared hands and feet open and unlocked to a world around us, we keep things from coming in and going out.

Those early ones that first Easter, arrived at the tomb, early in the morning when it was still dark, the rest left, but Mary, Mary stayed, amazed and bewildered that the stone was rolled away and doubly amazed that what they had expected was not what they found. Burdens were rolled away, but expectations had to be rearranged.

That to me is the power of resurrection—the constancy that rests in the message of Easter—Burdens are lifted, rolled away and life is rearranged.

I often wonder what the tombs of our life are and of this world that we are more than perfectly happy to allow the stone to seal everything up nice and tight and don't want for that door to ever be opened.

I wonder, could it be the tomb of complacency? Complacency to thinking that the stone is too heavy to move. The burden too heavy to bear and the issues too hard to manage, so easier to just keep that locked away and buried deep.

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- Complacency towards equity of pay in the work force.
- Complacency towards the gun violence and gang violence that plague our streets.
- Complacency towards “the way we have always done it” mentality. Both in church and in the world.

Or the tombs we lock ourselves into behind safe boulders that hide our self-doubt, worry, anxiety, job security, family expectations?

Or the tombs of fear over a diagnosis, or life change, or you name it?

“When they looked up. . they saw the stone had been rolled away.”

Friends, the stone that tried to encapsulate death, God’s own, has been rolled away. It no longer has a hold of us. We are invited to sing with the Psalmist: . “This is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. On this day the Lord has acted, we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

Indeed, God has acted, and continues to act. God is calling forth that not only the rocks cry out, but the stones be rolled away from all the tombs of your life. We are called to live as resurrection people. People who bring with us spices of grace, mercy, and love, as we show up to the tombs of the living: We are invited to walk with sisters and brothers and come out of the tombs of life, for the stone has been rolled away.

“In a beautiful essay on the resurrection, theologian and writer Chris Barnes reminds us of what actually matters during Holy Week: “The question that Easter asks of us is not, ‘Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?’ Frankly, that is not particularly hard. What the Gospels ask is not, ‘Do you believe?’ but ‘Have you encountered the risen Christ?’” As Mary, proclaimed, when her own name was called and Jesus looked deeply into her. Mary said, “I have seen the Lord.”

What I see in the resurrection narratives are individual people having profoundly individual encounters with Christ. The encounters don’t look identical. When Peter sees the empty tomb, he runs away. When the beloved disciple sees it, he believes without comprehension. When Mary sees it, she weeps and waits for more.” (Debbie Thomas)

In other words, we come to the empty tomb as ourselves, for good or for ill. We don't shed our baggage ahead of time; it barges in with us and shapes our perceptions and conclusions. What matters, then, is encountering the risen Jesus in the particulars of our own messy lives. What matters is finding in the empty tomb the hope we need for our own struggles, losses, traumas, and disappointments.

This type of witness isn’t automatic or easy. It requires risk — the risk of hanging on to hope when all else fails. The risk of sitting in the dark after everyone else runs away. The risk of turning towards the one who calls our name, and recognizing him for the savior he is. Often, it’s only in retrospect, only as I look back at the “gravesides” of my life, that I see my salvation.

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Poet R.S. Thomas describes the process this way in his poem, “The Answer”: There have been times/when, after long on my knees/ in a cold chancel, a stone has rolled/from my mind, and I have looked/in and seen the old questions lie/ folded and in a place/by themselves, like the piled/graveclothes of love’s risen body.”

Each time we stand at those tombs of life—we proclaim with boldness that this is the Lord’s doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. On that day, the first day of the week, the first Easter, the Lord acted, continues to act, and we will rejoice and be glad in it.

For he is not here. He has been raised. Come out of your tomb’s dear friends—for we have seen the Lord and the Lord greets us sweetly in broken bread and wine poured. For you, for me, for those yet to come. We will indeed rejoice and be glad in this.

Alleluia! Amen