

Lingering Darkness

John 20:1-18

Lingering in the Shadows of Easter

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Sunday, March 27, 2005

Worship at 8:30, 10, and 11:30 a.m.

We come to you, resurrected Lord Jesus, out of the reality of our lives, in a world that is not resolved and with families that still fight. From jobs that do not fulfill us. From bodies that age and become ill, as we face death. We come to you, risen Lord Jesus Christ, that you will speak to us now even in the midst of grief and darkness. The power of your love, your light, your resurrection, we hear now your Word. Jesus, speak to us by name. Amen.

It is a common American practice that we get as quickly as possible to the positive and not talk about the negative. I believe in this day and age there's a bit more cynicism than that, a bit more suspicion. I believe that many of us would like to linger a bit more in the darkness and wrestle with the questions that have not been answered. Our cynicism may in fact go with us wherever we go. I suggest that there may be some patterns of life that are full of edginess and darkness that we bring to those around us.

As a reflection of that, I want to read from a book that was given to me by the Bethlehem church before I left, *Today I Will Nourish My Inner Martyr*. "The cynic says, I understand I have no successes, therefore, I will work on denying all my failures. Today I will hang up on someone when the conversation bores me, later I will say the phone inexplicably disconnected. Today I will pit two of my friends against each other. Today I will purchase at least one product that wreaks havoc on the environment. If I feel left out of a conversation today, I will skillfully withdraw or draw attention to myself by saying something rude to the people in the conversation. Today I celebrate my ability to verbally support others while mentally judging them. At least I can take comfort in the fact that no one knows the real source of my shame. Today I will use big words to intimidate people."

Cynicism is an ongoing experience of darkness, even from people who say that they celebrate the resurrection. I take from your silence that this hits a bit too close to home. I understand. We want to believe that there is a resurrection without dealing with the darkness. But the fact is that in this text, in the gospel text that we read entirely today, there is no resurrection, except dealing with the darkness. This gospel text invites us to linger in the darkness there with Mary.

Not too long ago in an Easter celebration in Bethlehem, I preached the resurrection out of the theme of dealing with death. A few members were upset with me. One said, "I don't come to church on Easter to hear about death. I don't want to think about death, that's why I came here on Easter. If wanted to hear about death, I'd come other Sundays." I'm here to say that there's no way to deal with the resurrection without dealing with the cross and death.

It is important that we join Mary in the darkness before the dawn. St. John understood this. St. John begins his gospel, "Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light." The light comes only to those who are in the darkness. If you do not believe that St. John had a rather dark view of reality, read the book of Revelation where there are occasional explosions of light in heaven, but mostly we hear about hell on earth. It's one of the books that we Presbyterians like to avoid. What do we do with life in the midst of darkness? Some of you down in Stone Hall today may feel like you are in the darkness. You would like that stone removed.

We here today share a sense of the dark places in our lives. Darkness pervades; there is no light that we recognize unless the light shines in the darkness. This scene happens in the darkness. It is the darkness outside. It is the darkness in the tomb. It is the darkness in Mary's own grief. It is the disciples' understanding of the darkness; they do not believe Jesus will be raised from the dead. And we realize in this world today, there is pervasive darkness: terrorism, tsumanis, cancer, divorce, brokenness, anger, vindictiveness. We affirm the resurrection and the light of Jesus Christ in the midst of such darkness.

This Celtic cross that we have hanging is the St. Patrick's symbol of how the light comes in the midst of the darkness. The people of Ireland were pagans. They worshiped the sun and fires; they were preoccupied with the light. And Patrick wanted them to understand that the cross contained all the light. The sun you see in the circle around the core of the cross is inside the cross. It is surrounded on all sides by the cross—it is imbedded in the cross. It is contained by the cross. It is St. Patrick's way of saying the Celtic spirituality will deal with darkness; and light comes in the midst of the darkness.

In the dark, the resurrection has already happened. The stone's already rolled away—the body is already gone and Mary, there in the darkness, realizes that something has happened. But she is not immediately drawn into the resurrection; Jesus doesn't show up and say, "Mary, I'm here." She continues to grieve—she continues to ask questions—she continues to wrestle with the angst of the moment and wonder what's happened. The darkness means that we will continue to experience more emptiness, more grief, more mystery, and more unsolved questions. We will continue to experience anxiety and frustration, confusion that our hope for the resurrection will have a certain postponement to it. There will be disappointment and disillusionment. The resurrection has occurred, but it's still dark outside. If you don't believe it's dark outside or inside, then you are out of touch with reality. You are a happy, happy Christian who doesn't get it. You know people like that; they can drive you crazy. Darkness pervades, but it does not prevail.

I received an email this past week from a woman by the name of Mary in mid-life. She was on her way to a church retreat where she was going to enjoy the power of being among Christ's people and resurrection. She got very sick and thought she had the stomach flu. By the time she was ready to go, she was bent over in pain and had to be taken to the hospital. With a CT scan, they discovered that she might have third stage ovarian cancer. Just like that. This is what she said in her e-mail, "Still trying to assimilate all that has happened to me, I have a new empathy for those who may suffer physically or worse. I have a new appreciation for Jesus'

physical suffering for us in his passion and this tidal wave of feeling loved by all the people of God, family, friends, and congregation who basically dealt with losing me to cancer and then getting me back. This is how I have experienced Lent, condensed into a short event of life. As far as I am concerned Easter has already happened." We can relate to that. We can relate to those moments where the darkness is pervasive and we do not know if we are going to make it through to the end of the day.

Jesus has already been raised. Even if we don't see him—or feel him—or know he's there, he has already been raised. That's the message of the gospel. In your darkest moment, Jesus is there and he is resurrected. Faith and hope fight the darkness. Resist giving in to it. Even in her grief, Mary weeping before the tomb is trying to hold onto some vestige of Jesus himself, even by saying that his body is himself. She moves and feels and asks and seeks...she runs and she tells...she paces and she wails...she touches and she walks...and she waits. She does not stop moving or feeling. She's in darkness, but she has hope.

I dedicate this sermon to a young woman by the name of Mary, who several years ago I went to visit in the hospital. She had stepped out in front of a fast moving car whose driver did not see her, and she was struck down. They thought she would die at the scene. They took her to the hospital and they thought she would die that day. The doctor said she would not live through the night. They went on to say that she would not live without life support. She would not be able to function fully; she would be brain dead, she would be a vegetable for the rest of her life. Pray that she'd be taken: she could not learn, she would not improve much, she would be bedridden, she would not be able to use her hands or legs. She would not walk; she would not talk. This is an e-mail I got from her family this past week. "Mary is talking all the time. She can stand with the help of walker and a physical therapist. She is anxious to look normal again; she has hope. Progress has not stopped. God is so good. Her school asked her to do a painting for their auction. She called it the Colors of Life. She's anxious to personally deliver it to the school." Mary is there in the darkness and not giving up, and Jesus is right there with her whispering in her ear that resurrection is here, and she can live into it.

Mary Magdelene was there at the tomb with many questions and observations. She kept watching and looking, asking a set of questions of three times. She asked the disciples first, then the angels, and then Jesus himself--not knowing it was Jesus. She did not give up her questions: Where have they taken him? What am I going to do without him? If you think there are easy answers, just look at Mary. Yogi Berra said you can observe a lot of things just by watching. And Mary kept watching.

Dr. Timothy Johnson, the medical editor of ABC News, in his newest book, *Finding God in the Questions*, says that the older he gets the more he believes that asking the questions is where God shows up. In the questions that are not answerable, where there are no easy answers, the resurrected Jesus is there while we're asking the questions.

In a recent *Newsweek* article there is a description of how Jesus became the Christ. The story talks about one of the cynics who addressed the gospel in the Second Century, a man by the name of Salsus who called Mary Magdelene a hysterical woman who was out of touch with reality. He said that the disciples were on hallucinatory drugs. Controversy over Mary Magdelene still keeps her in the dark. The entire movement around the diVinci code is really centered on the controversy of who Mary Magdelene is. There is still darkness around her very nature and being, her role among the disciples. There are still questions being asked. Two centuries later, Mary is still seen as one who is in the dark.

All this energy around this movement of the disciples and the text with Mary at the center has a little humor in it. There is humor to be had in the midst of the darkest moments. The scriptures are full of humorous statements. Notice, Mary goes to John and Peter and tells them about Jesus' body not being there. And they rush out in competition with each other all the way to the tomb. It says finally that the younger one beat the older one to the tomb. Ah, but the older one went in first. Ah, but the younger believed first. You can see the competition there between the disciples.

Even in a moment of darkness, they are wrestling with who's on first and who's on second. The darkness lingers. But, Jesus has already been resurrected. And Mary lingers right there when the disciples are gone and in her willingness to stay in the darkness and wrestle with the grief, two angels show up. Then Jesus shows up. Not knowing that it's Jesus she asks, "Where have you taken him?" Finally, Jesus addresses Mary by name, "Mary, it's me." In the darkness when you are least expecting that the resurrected Jesus will show up, you will be called by name. It's personal. It's not a general resurrection; it's a resurrection for you. Jesus has gotten your name, and that's when you know that it's personal, and it's real, and it will change your life. Mary could hear Jesus and his words to go change history, even to become an apostle to the apostles at that moment. Go tell the apostles to meet me, I'm ascending to the Father.

The darkness continues for Mary Magdelene. She doesn't get much respect, but John gives her the ultimate respect. In the resurrection she's the first witness, she's the first preacher, she's the first apostle. In the darkness the resurrection has already changed her life.

In this past two weeks we have seen how a young woman, who is working through the big questions of her life in faith can have a sense of resurrection in the midst of the darkness. We've seen Ashley Smith there reading *The Purpose Driven Life* by Rick Warren. Being taken hostage by Brian Nichols and wondering if she was going to be killed. And for seven hours, she works on not being panicked, not being overcome by darkness, but treating this man with dignity and love and care, and it registers to the depth of his being. In the darkness Jesus shows up and calls Ashley by name, calls Brian by name. There is no darkness for the gospel to change a person's life.

Today you come with darkness, with anxiety, with uncertainty, with suspicion, even with cynicism. Jesus Christ has already been raised. And Jesus wants to call you by name. To catch your attention, so that you personally can proclaim.