

A Holy Resurrection
John 20:1-18
March 31, 2024
First Presbyterian, Luling

On Maundy Thursday, we dwelt in holy darkness, and read a whole bunch of scriptures about God being present in the darkness. Even if we can't feel or see or sense God's presence, God is with us in the darkness.

If you were with us on Thursday, I hope that your ears perked up for the first verse of the Easter morning reading from John's Gospel. "Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark...*"

Mary Magdalene makes her way to the tomb where Jesus's body has been lying since the crucifixion on Friday. She goes alone, unlike in the other gospels.

And she isn't going in order to prepare his body for burial with spices, as the women do in the other gospels.

A podcast I was listening to this week said she goes to the tomb, "empty handed and empty hearted."¹

Darkness is never only literal for the Gospel of John. It's always figurative, too. She makes her way to the tomb in the literal darkness before sunrise. Some of you enjoy that hour of the day. I am not among you, but I've certainly been awake in those hours because of some other, figurative darkness. And that is why Mary is awake and walking to the tomb while it was still dark. Mary's heart is empty. She is in the darkness of deep and painful grief.

¹ Karoline Lewis, in "Sermon Brainwave" podcast for 3/31/24, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6Dbk9WRSF4&t=1216s>

And it gets worse before it gets better. She arrives at the garden where the tomb is and immediately notices that the tomb is open, that the stone is no longer covering the entrance. She assumes the worst, that Jesus's body has been stolen. It's understandable that she jumps to this conclusion without further investigation. The unimaginably horrible crucifixion has happened to her friend and teacher, the darkness has descended, and she can't see her way out.

The darkness has become darker still for Mary Magdalene, but the light is coming. Anyone who has ever watched a sunrise or sunset, which is to say everyone, knows that light and dark are not two completely separate categories. There are degrees of lightness and darkness, twilight and dawn. As the sun begins to rise and the sky lightens enough for Simon

Peter and the other disciple to see into the tomb, the darkness of Mary Magdalene's despair is also beginning to lift.

The two disciples have only the dimmest bit of light dawning on them. They see that Jesus is not in the tomb, they see the linens set aside, they "believe," John tells us, but they don't understand. They have faith but not understanding. In this, I'm frequently in their shoes. Only the smallest bit of light in the darkness, trusting that God is sending that light but not understanding the persistence of the darkness. They go back home and don't say a word to anyone.

The light continues to grow for Mary Magdalene, though. She finally looks inside the tomb and sees for herself. What she sees is different than what the men saw. She sees two angels, as she is weeping, and tells

them what she told the disciples, that she doesn't know where her Lord is.

She then has a similar conversation with a man she assumes to be the gardener. But Jesus calls her name and she instantly recognizes him. The light has come for Mary, and she believes and she understands. "Teacher" she says to him. If there were a movie version of Easter morning, this would be the moment when the sun rises over the horizon, and the whole garden is flooded with light, not a trace of darkness.

It isn't a movie, and real life is rarely so clear as to be all light with no darkness at all. Jesus tells her not to hold on to him. Of course she wants to hold on to him. She wants things to go back to the way they were, before the betrayal and the crucifixion. She wants to hold on to him and let him be her teacher and her Lord.

But he says don't do it. A shadow creeps in. Then he instructs her to go tell the others that he will be ascending to the Father. What that means to Mary Magdalene, in a personal way, is that he is leaving again. She will be losing him again. He isn't clear about the timeframe, and she doesn't ask any questions. Maybe she can't bear to hear the answer.

In the darkness of the tomb, resurrection happens. In the darkness, God is present and at work. We can't always perceive it. We might have faith that resurrection is happening, but we don't understand what or how or why. We have ideas of what is happening that we would like to hold on to, ideas that don't involve saying goodbye again, ideas that don't involve changing our minds or habits or practices. But as the light comes, we see that resurrection may not meet our expectations.

A friend of mine told me a story this week, about a class project in seminary. A group of students had an assignment to put together a lesson about the light shining in the darkness. They took the whole class down to the racquetball court at the seminary. The racquetball court was in the basement of the building, and I played many a game in there. That's what it was, but it was not originally intended to serve that function. It was built to be a nuclear fallout shelter. The signs were still outside the door. So the door sealed as completely as a door built in the 1960s could seal. No windows. Thick walls. The class went into the racquetball court, and the students in charge turned out the lights. My friend said it was completely and utterly dark. Even after waiting a good while to let their eyes adjust, it was still completely and utterly dark. Suddenly, the students in charge struck

a match and lit a single candle. It was so bright, in comparison to the darkness they had been sitting in that it startled them all.

That's the power of the light. A tee-niney light can overwhelm the darkness. The light of Easter morning, the light that dawned in Mary Magdalene's empty heart, the light that shines in the darkness—*that* light can overwhelm any darkness at all.

Shadows are still there. We still have to say our goodbyes. We still can't hold on to all the people and things we want to hold on to. We still have to admit that we don't completely understand. But the light shines. The light comes. We say with Mary Magdalene, "I have seen the Lord."