

In the Dark

John 20:1-18

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It can be a challenge to proclaim Easter in a Good Friday world, can't it? Let's just look at a few things that have happened in our world during this past Holy Week.¹ North Korea systematically shut down the majority of the hotlines they share with South Korea and have stated they are putting their missile and artillery units on "the highest alert." The KKK tried to have their "biggest rally yet" yesterday in Memphis—only 75 people showed up, and they had a broken megaphone. A female teacher in Pakistan was killed by the Taliban as she walked to work at an all-girls school. And those are just some of the headlines pulled from the New York Times and the Washington Post. It can be a challenge to proclaim Easter in what seems to be too often a Good Friday world.

That challenge is why I am thankful for the way this story from John begins. "Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb...." Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*....

Mary Magdalene certainly lived in what she thought was a Good Friday world. The happenings of the last week must have been a blur to her. The week had begun with such promise and hope—Jesus riding into Jerusalem, surrounded by "Hosanna." But then, right before her eyes, it all seemed to fall to pieces. Judas betrayed him. Jesus was arrested. And while Jesus was at trial, Peter denied him and was no help at all.

And then, all those people who, just a few days earlier were singing "Hosannas," got caught up in the bloodlust and the fear and the political power struggle and started shouting "Crucify" instead. And they did. And now Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried in the tomb. So when the Gospel writer John penned "*while it was still dark*," he was making a profound understatement of just how dark it was, just how dark it felt to Mary Magdalene and the others. And I can't help but wonder if she felt it would be that kind of dark forever.

And yet, even *while it was still dark*, Mary decided to make her way to that tomb. John does not tell us why she was going. Perhaps she just needed to see it again—the tomb, the stone, the finality of it all. Maybe she was on that endless journey to find ever-elusive closure. I wonder if she wanted to make sure the grave looked clean and cared for; if she hoped to put out seasonal flowers. Or it could have been that she just needed to get out of her grief-filled, heavy home to get some fresh air. Early morning, damp, dark air. We don't know her motivation for sure. John simply writes that early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

But when she arrived, Mary felt undone by what she found. The stone had been rolled away. Clearly, someone had desecrated the grave of her Jesus. Was it not enough they had killed him? Was it not enough they had humiliated him? Was it not enough they had won? I imagine the break in Mary's heart grew even deeper. She ran back to the male disciples who were all still in hiding, locked up in their own dark rooms

of fear and guilt. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we do not know where they have laid him.”

And even though it was still dark, immediately after Mary’s announcement, Peter and the beloved disciple took off to go and see for themselves. But unlike Mary, they did not stop at the entrance of the tomb. Peter went in first, and then the beloved disciple followed. They saw the tomb was empty. And they saw that the graveclothes that had bound Jesus’ hands, feet, and head were either folded up or rolled up, nicely and neatly. And none of what they found made one bit of sense. Who takes off the burial clothes before removing a body? Who folds things up when desecrating a grave? They did not understand. Like Mary, they believed the body was gone, but they could not explain what had happened to it. It was still *so dark*. It was still so early. It still felt like Good Friday to them. So they returned back to the house with the others and once again locked the door behind them.

But Mary? Well, Mary could not leave. Mary stayed right there and refused to be anywhere else with her grief. And as she remained in that place, Mary did what most of us do whenever someone dear to us dies: she wept and wept and wept. A few days ago—they were singing Hosannas. A few days ago, life held such hope and promise. And now, not only did she *not* have her *living* Jesus, but she did not even have his dead body anymore. So all she knew to do was stay there and weep. At some point, though, she must have realized that her eyes had adjusted, grown used to the darkness. So she bent down to look inside the tomb for herself. And she saw what John says were two angels in white, sitting where Jesus’ body had been laid. But Mary, having adjusted to being in the dark, did not have seen them as angels. You can tell by her response. She did not know who they were, but they brought her no comfort.

After all, she was living in a Good Friday world. And everyone knows you don’t see angels in a Good Friday world; you only see strangers. In a Good Friday world, you don’t feel comfort; you only feel threat. In a Good Friday world, you don’t greet people with hope; you only peer at them through eyes dimmed by suspicion. When you live only in a Good Friday world and *your eyes have gotten too used to the dark*, and you are crying over a stolen body, a stolen hope, a stolen promise, everyone you meet is not a potential friend, but a potential thief.² Even two angels sitting in an empty tomb.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” Now I must confess that Mary showed a lot more restraint in that moment than I might have shown. When I live in a Good Friday world, I get a lot angrier than Mary appears to be. “Woman, why are you weeping?” “I am weeping because I just heard children’s voices on the radio talking about how their parents had to let their power get shut off in order to buy food.” “It gets awfully dark,” one little voice admitted. “Woman, why are you weeping?” “I am weeping because I keep hearing of new advanced cancer diagnoses for people whom I love and I can’t make it okay.” “Woman, why are you weeping?” “I am weeping because as I watched the debates outside the Supreme Court this week, I realized how difficult it might be for us as church family to talk about marriage in ways in which everyone feels heard, valued, and loved; yet I am convicted we *must*.” “Woman, why are you weeping?” “I am weeping because of stories like Stubenville and Newtown and too many others to name.” “Woman, why are you weeping?” “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

And after Mary responded to those strangers, you get this sense that she had had enough. So she turned around to leave, but someone was standing there, blocking her way, someone that John tells us is the risen Jesus. But sweet Mary, well, Mary's eyes had grown so used to the dark. She had adjusted to it. And the shroud of her Good Friday world felt so heavy upon her shoulders. So all she saw was a stranger, someone who looked suspicious, a possible thief. She was in such a Good Friday state that she could not even recognize her Jesus.

"Sir, if you have carried him away, just tell me where he is and I will go and get him." Let me just go and get the body and put it back where it is supposed to be, so that we can roll the stone back in place and be done with all of this. Let's just get back to the way it is now, the way of Good Friday and darkness and pain so that we get adjusted to it and learn how to survive in it.

But Jesus did not want her, us, to get adjusted to it. Living in God's reign is about more than mere survival. So he did the one thing he knew that might clear her eyes. "Mary. *Mary*." He called her name. For our risen Savior knows that when you are living in a Good Friday world and your eyes have grown too used to the dark and your heart is broken, and you are tired of weeping and the shroud of grief or loss or brokenness feels so heavy on your shoulders, only *one thing* can stop you and bring you into Easter life. You have to hear him call your name. "John. Gin. Beth. Brad."

Our risen Lord and Savior knows that the only way to shake us out of the Good Friday haze is to call our name. And God does that in all kinds of ways. God does it with music that frees our souls. God does it with poetry or the hug of a dear friend. God does it with the quick laughter of a child or a warm meal from your deacon. Maybe God does it with a dream or a vision or a real sense of hearing Jesus' voice calling you. God uses all kinds of people, all kinds of tactics to get to us.

For our risen Savior knows that the only way to shake us into Easter newness is to call our name one way or another. So our eyes might be opened to the sun that is starting to rise, so we might remember the darkness does not last forever, so we are reminded that it is precisely *when* we are in the darkness, surrounded by the shadows of Good Friday, eyes tired from weeping, souls weary from fighting, that it is precisely out of that kind of stuff that Easter always rises.

In the midst of the darkness, in the midst of the chaos and grief, in the midst of hell and brokenness, in the midst of utter hopelessness, in the midst of a Good Friday world, in the midst of God-forsakenness, in the midst of all of that—our testimony standing at the empty tomb with Mary is that our God is still at work, and Easter always rises. God does some of God's best stuff in the dark. Always has, always will.

The risen Jesus calls out Mary's name and her eyes are cleared and she recognizes him. And then beloved Mary does what we all try to do in response to such powerful Easter moments. She goes from seeing resurrection and confessing her faith to trying to grab it and contain it with both hands.³ Mary immediately embraces him, normal and expected, but then does not want to let go again. So Jesus has to say to her, "No, stop holding on to me; stop clinging to me." That is not what you do now. Rather, when you have experienced Easter power and heard the risen Lord call your name one way or another, you give up on trying to contain and control Jesus. That is not what you do now. Instead, you go and you tell.

You go and you tell your brothers and sisters that he is risen. You go and you tell your

brothers and sisters that though we can kill God's Love, we cannot keep God's Love dead and buried.⁴ You go and you tell your brothers and sisters that death has lost its sting and that nothing will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even the powers and principalities that deal in death. You go and you tell your brothers and sisters that the risen Lord is also calling their names, and longs for them to see with their own eyes the power and the freedom of being God's Easter people in what too often looks like a Good Friday world.

And then if people say to you, "Prove it." You simply say, "I can't." The resurrection is the one and only event in Jesus' life that was entirely between him and God.⁵ I can't prove it or explain it or force it to make sense. But, I believe it. I trust it. I have experienced it. I know it. I base my life on it. For as an Easter people, we can testify that even in those times when we find our own eyes have adjusted to the dark, Good Friday is trying to take hold of our imaginations, the powers and principalities that deal in death are all around and gathering strength, then our testimony as a people is that God always does God's best work in the dark and that Easter always rises. We believe that on the other side of death and pain is always resurrection, always new creation, always life. So we are invited to listen for the calling of our names to clear our eyes, to go, and to tell.

So sisters and brothers, on this Easter Sunday, this is what I know: I have seen the Lord. The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Notes

1 From the news of Holy Week in 2013.

2 This insight is from Anna Carter Florence, my preaching professor at Columbia Seminary. She uses this imagery in her article called "Preaching the Text," on www.goodpreacher.com.

3 Again, thanks to Dr. Carter Florence for such wisdom.

4 This great Easter proclamation was preached by the Rev. Dr. William Sloane Coffin, one of my preaching heroes.

5 Barbara Brown Taylor, "Escape from the Tomb," *Christian Century*, April 1, 1998.