

Easter Sunday 2024
John 20:1-18
“Still Rolling Stones”
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, Preaching

I admit it, Easter is my favorite day of the year. Easter is my holiday. You see, my family loves to decorate for Christmas, but Easter, Easter is all mine. And my house is filled with bunnies – stuffed bunnies, ceramic bunnies, bunnies filled with chocolate eggs, bunny candles, bunny salt and pepper shakers, bunnies everywhere and eggs, plastic eggs, glass eggs, ceramic eggs, egg trees, flowers, butterflies. I always say Easter is really much more important than Christmas because if I think about it, if we didn't have the resurrection, would we even celebrate Jesus' birth? Easter is my holiday because I love spring – birds returning, bulbs blooming, spring peepers, grass turning green – new life, a new creation. I mean the word Easter comes from Eostre who is the goddess of springs. Being surrounded this morning by all these flowers and banners and joy, it's really easy to forget that Easter, Easter morning began in the dark. We left here Friday night in the dark. Resurrection happens in the dark.

And I also admit, of all the different versions of the Easter Story in each Gospel, John's version is my favorite. John is a wonderful storyteller. You can really feel the emotions of this scene. Oh sure, I like that in Matthew's Gospel there is a mighty earthquake that rolls back the stone and the guards outside the tomb are so frightened that they pretend they are dead. And I like that in Mark's Gospel there are several women who go to the tomb that morning and that they were so afraid of what they saw, a young man dressed in a white robe, that they don't tell anyone. And that in Luke's Gospel the angels have dazzling clothes, and no one believes the women, no one except Peter. But I truly believe John tells the story the best with so much wonder, amazement, mystery, light, and love.

The Gospel of John loves the contrast of darkness and light. Those who lived in deep darkness on whom light has shined. Jesus is the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it. John comes as a witness to the light. But today, Easter begins in the dark.

You would think someone, one of those disciples, would have remembered one of the many, many times Jesus told them that he would die, but promised repeatedly, that he would rise on the 3rd day. You would think someone would have remembered this and did the math? Let's see He died on Friday, Saturday was horrible, today is Sunday . . . 1, 2, today's the 3rd day . . . hey, maybe we ought to check out that tomb Jesus is in. Nope, none of them remembered. Or maybe they were all just too scared and devastated, sitting huddled in the dark. And on Sunday, in John's Gospel, it is Mary, all alone, who goes to the tomb, braving the dark.

Mary Magdalene. Mary is mentioned only very briefly in Scripture and yet she was a very devoted follower of Jesus. As a follower of Jesus, Mary had seen lives made new, bodies healed, eyes opened, demons exercised, people risen from the dead. She saw how the crowds loved him and those in power hated him. And Jesus, Jesus had changed her entire world. He was likely the very first person to ever treat her as a human being, a person of sacred worth, someone worth loving. And so, she loved him right back. She even stood near the cross, watching for hours as her savior suffered excruciating pain, as they killed him; and her heart was broken. Completely broken. It was dark.

So she went, while it was still dark. And we don't even know why she came to the tomb; it doesn't say she was carrying spices to anoint his body. We don't know why there's nobody there when she arrives. Maybe there was an earthquake, the stone rolled away and the guards, after pretending they were dead, ran away. There is so much we don't know and that is really the point, the mystery of it all. Maybe she just needed to be near him.

So, she arrives at the tomb, and she sees in the semi-darkness not a closed tomb but a gaping hole! Alarmed, she looks inside, seeing that Jesus' body is gone. How could this be? Grave Robbers? Some final act of blasphemy against her Savior? Terrified she just takes off running and tells Peter, and the one whom Jesus loved, we know this is John. And they take off running. I just love how John describes how, since he was younger and faster, arrived first but isn't foolish like Peter who arrives and just runs on past him right into the tomb – he's not worried about what they called "ceremonial defilement from contact with the dead."

O Peter, the one who sometimes had faith like a rock, other times like sand – the one who had walked on water until, he took his eyes off Jesus and sank – the one who loved Jesus so much and yet denied knowing Jesus three times; runs right on in. Holy cow, she is right, he's gone! But this is not a CSI crime scene investigation, the linen cloth Jesus' body was wrapped in is still there, neatly folded. It's not about searching for evidence. They also see the cloth that was placed on his head after the crown of thorns was taken off, rolled up neatly in the corner. And for a second John believes, but does he? Not completely because the very next sentence says they didn't understand. There was just too much fear and confusion to fully understand what they were seeing, so they just slowly walked back to the safety of where they were staying.

They just can't get their minds around what they saw. And that is the point. Easter has burst into our world, the world of space, time and matter, real history and real people and real life – and our minds cannot fully understand all of this. This is about an event that rattled the entire world, and after the stone was rolled away, the world was a different place. And yet they dared, they dared to believe that hope was possible, that the long night was over, and morning had broken. Darkness had turned to light. We too need to dare to believe that hope.

One disciple sees and maybe believes, and one sees and is not so sure he believes. But to Mary, to Mary belongs the glory of being the first person to see the Risen Christ. Mary must have followed the disciples back to the tomb but because she was probably walking quite slowly, they were gone by the time she got there. As she reaches the tomb, in full light now, she just starts sobbing again. They've killed her savior in the most horrible way and now they've taken his body away. She's so upset she isn't even fazed when a voice asks, "why are you weeping"? Why? Are you kidding me? "They've taken my Lord away and I don't know where he is!" Sensing another person behind her, she turns, and another voice asks the same thing, "why are you weeping"? Why aren't you? Again, she answers, "look if you know where he is, you had better tell me right now." And then I picture Jesus, not shouting her name – Mary! But softly and lovingly saying, Mary. And the light shines and the tears are removed from her eyes. It is her savior. Not dead, not lifeless, not gone. Right before her, looking into her eyes. And he talks about her God and our God, and she gets it. This is not God far away, not God not listening, but God present, God doing impossible things, God making morning miracles out of death's darkness. It's light now, she's no longer in the dark, shine, for thy light has come.

Now we don't know what Jesus looked like when he rose from the dead, but we do know Mary wants to hold on to him. She probably just fell at his feet, and he tells her, "There's more you need to do Mary. Go and tell. Go and tell the others". And she takes off running with the beautiful, wonderful words of promise, "I have seen the Lord!" And after she tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord", then . . . wait that's where today's story ends today. Guess you are going to have to come back next week to find out what happens next!

On that blessed Easter Day, Jesus' disciples, including Mary, discovered a new world suddenly full of hope and possibility. Their darkness, their fears and doubts were made new, for God's love had broken through time and space, and their spirits were lifted into a new way of life. So here we sit some 2,000 years later, with a little faith and a beautiful story, but also with our own doubts and fears and confusion and darkness. The light has come into our world, but we live in a Good Friday world, where most news is bad news. And many of us live lives that have experienced real darkness. Are you in the dark right now? Are you stuck in that dark tomb? Wondering how to find a better job, how to get out of debt, how to help your child who is having a really hard time, how to help your aging parents, how to move through your pain, your suffering, your loss of meaning, your new diagnosis, your failure, your fear?

We all know darkness, deep darkness, but my friends, God is still rolling stones, making a way where there seems to be no way.

In the words from a favorite song by Laura Daigle:

All at once I came alive

This beating heart

these open eyes.

The grave let go

the darkness should have known

you're still rolling stones

I thought that I was too far gone

I'm the one who dug this grave

but you called my name, "Rise up!" ("Still Rolling Stones")

How often are we so deep in despair, that we don't notice Jesus standing right there the whole time and we don't recognize him? We don't see the person right next to us, ready to help, ready to hold our hand. We don't pray to the one just waiting for us to simply ask for what we need. You see, because God is still rolling stones, we have hope, no matter who we are, no matter what's going on in our lives, no matter what we look like, feel like, no matter what, we are not alone. Are you still in the tomb of darkness living as if you are stuck in there?

Sometimes we all feel stuck in the tombs of our lives. As one pastor writes, circumstances have assumed control. Things are hopeless and we are helpless, so we feel powerless. "But that's not how God operates. That's not even his nature. [God] is not a frustrated, powerless God. God is the way-maker. He is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-consuming. [God] causes valleys to be raised up and mountains be made low. [God] turns graves into gardens and bones into armies. Our God is a sea-splitting, stone-rolling, wind-whispering, fire-from-heaven, water-from-the-rock, stop-the-moon-in-the-sky kind of God". (1)

Do you think that the God that can do all that, can't raise your little tired self out of your tomb of darkness? All it takes is about five seconds of doubt to get into our heads and our sense of worth and confidence feels under attack, and we re-enter that tomb, dark and alone.

But God tells us, we are enough. We are loved, no matter what. Remember, that, you are enough, you, “not some idealized, impossibly perfect version of you. Not the person you wish you were. Not the person your parents told you that you should be. Not the person you’re pretending to be. Not the person in your Tinder profile or Instagram posts. You. Today. Right now. You are already accepted by God. You already have the mind of Christ. The Spirit already dwells in you.” (2) So, rise up and come out of your tomb of darkness for God’s light shines on you.

The Gospel of John uses a very important phrase when describing the disciples, the disciples “came to believe” not right away, not all at once, over time, seeing, feeling, experiencing. “Early in the morning, while it was still dark.” Jesus comes in the darkness and sometimes it takes a long time to recognize him. He doesn’t look the way we expect him to look. He doesn’t let us cling to our old ideas, our old ways. He disappears again just as we are about to hold onto him. But he comes, he calls our name, and in that instant, we recognize him.

After the confusion and grief, after the dark of Friday, the pain of Saturday, there was miracle and mystery on that blessed Easter Sunday. Easter is my day; Easter is your day. We love that today is all about the alleluias and banners and bunnies and butterflies – but tomorrow, tomorrow there is a real and ever-changing world outside these doors waiting for us and in it some really dark places. In order to move out of our tombs of darkness, we need to believe the rest of the story – that Easter day continues every day, every single day. For every Easter reminds us of the most important promise ever given - that there is no force on earth, no force on earth, especially the powerful forces of our own doubts and unfaithfulness and confusion and grief, no force that can keep the Risen Christ from us. And this promise is not an idea, a principle, a concept, but a person, a real person risen before us, a person that shows us more love than we’ve ever known, more hope than we’ve ever imagined. Nothing will ever be the same again. And God, God is still rolling stones away. So, rise up! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

(1) Furtick, The Rev. Steven. Do the New You. P. 31

(2) Ibid, p. 72