

The Light Dawns
John 20:1-18
April 16, 2017 – 10:30 a.m. – Easter Sunday

John tells us: “Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away.” If you were at our 8:00 a.m. Communion Service you heard me tell how Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell of three women who come to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday after the sun had risen; but John tells us that Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark. So, what’s going on here? Why the conflict? Those who know me, know that I repeatedly warn about taking the Bible too literally. Yes, I believe that every word of the Bible is true; but I also don’t believe that the Gospel writers were particularly interested in the astrological position of the sun on that first Easter Sunday. Rather, the Gospel writers are telling a slightly different story about the same event. Mark, (and Matthew and Luke are drawing on Mark), so Mark is telling us the Easter is “a new day.” A new day has dawned, a new beginning. With the resurrection, a new light has come into the world. To that, I say “Praise be to God. Alleluia and Amen.”

But John. . . It’s John that tells us that Jesus is the light of the world. Indeed the wonderful paradigm of the light of God shining in the darkness of the world is central to John’s Gospel, but here in John’s Easter Story, Mary goes to the tomb while it is still dark. You see, Mary is “in the dark.” Mary goes to the very dark tomb, looking for the light of the world; and, when she finds the tomb empty, she continues in the dark. She runs to Simon Peter and the other disciple, and she tells them, “They have taken the body from the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put it.” It’s in Luke’s Gospel that the angels at the tomb ask, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” But that’s exactly what Mary is doing. Jesus is alive, but Mary is still in the dark. She is still looking for a dead body.

So she runs and tells her friends, Peter and the other disciple, who tradition tells us was John, the beloved disciple, about the theft of a body; and the disciples, also in the dark, take off running to the tomb. The beloved disciple followed Peter into the tomb; and we’re told that he saw the empty tomb and the grave clothes neatly folded and he believed. Of what it is that he believed, we can’t be exactly certain; and apparently Peter did not share in the belief. John tells us, “They did not yet understand the scriptures that Jesus must rise from the dead; and they returned to the place where they were staying.” Despite the statement about the other disciple’s belief, it seems that they are still “in the dark,” or at least Peter is.

So let’s get back to Mary. Mary is definitely still in the dark. She’s left standing outside the tomb crying. She looks in and sees two angels who ask her, “Why are crying?” She replies, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t

know where they have put him.” You see, she’s still in the dark. It’s not until Jesus calls her name, “Mary,” that the light dawns.

And how often, that’s the case with us today. How often we find ourselves “in the dark.” Despite our Christian faith, despite our belief in the resurrection, we still find ourselves standing around outside an empty tomb, instead of celebrating a living Christ. But then, then we hear the call. Somebody. . . some voice in the back of our head calls our name; and suddenly we know the glory of the risen Christ. Suddenly our light dawns on a whole new day. That’s Easter, it’s a whole new day. The light has dawned, and nothing, truly nothing can put it out.

Two thousand years have come and gone since that first Easter, and many have tried to snuff out the light of Christ. Rome tried in the first and second centuries. The Muslim Empire tried in the eighth century. The Communist Regime tried in the twentieth century. If you were here at our 8:00 service, you heard me tell how Mau Tse Tung attempted to put out the light during the cultural Revolution in China. Authorities arrested all Christian preachers, most of which were never heard from again; and the communist government closed all the churches and confiscated their properties. And what happened? Christians in China looked to the first century church as their model. They started gathering secretly in people’s homes for worship, despite serious threats from the government. Over the years their numbers grew, as people saw that Christians were some of the most loving people in every neighborhood. Gatherings got bigger, and people moved to storefronts. Today there are over 100 million Christians in China. Eventually, the government gave up its program of suppressing Christianity and began licensing churches, including giving back most of the confiscated real estate.

Author Paul Nixon tells of preaching at the Central Methodist Church on People’s Square on Easter 2011. The church was packed; but, about a half hour into the service, several people got up and left, and others came and sat down. A little while later, some more folks got up and left, and others came as sat down. Suddenly Nixon realized that, as full as that large church was, there were three times as many people standing outside; and so, the folks in the church were rotating their places to give others a chance to worship; and this continued through most of the day. The light burned brightly that first Easter, and the light continues to burn brightly today.

Now, today, in the United States of America, and in most of the Western World, we are not likely to see masses of people standing outside of churches because there is not room in their sanctuaries; but that does not mean that the light has gone out. No, the light has not gone out. In fact, it’s been my experience that young adults, those folks that demographics refer to as the millennials, are more spiritual than people have been in decades. It’s also been my experience that those

same people are searching for new ways to experience and to express their spirituality. They're not so much interested in coming to a building to worship and pray and sing; and it doesn't matter whether the songs are traditional hymns or praise tunes. No, they want to make a difference in the world. They don't want to study the Gospel of Jesus Christ; they want to live the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And we. . . we the church need to find ways to make that happen.

But let's get back to our first century story. Today we celebrate. . . Jesus rose from the dead. And twenty-one hundred years ago, the disciples celebrated: "Our friend, our teacher, our master is alive."; and they spent time with him and they had meals with him, the celebrated with him and the learned from him; and forty days later, he left them to take his place with the Father. And they said, "What do we do now?"

But before he left, Jesus told them, "Wait. Wait; and the Spirit will lead you." And ten days later, that Spirit came and set their hearts on fire; and they went out. They left that upper room to spread the Good News of the Gospel; and it spread; and it spread; and it spread; and, because they went out, we are here today.

Friends, just as Jesus called Mary's name 2100 years ago, Jesus is calling us. Jesus is calling us as individuals and as a church, calling us into the world. There's a lot of darkness in the world; but the light of Christ burns brightly and the world needs that light.

It's Easter. A new day has dawned. The light of Christ burns bright. It's time to celebrate, it's time to learn, it's time to worship, it's time to pray, it's time to follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, I believe the Holy Spirit is calling us as individuals and as a church to worship God in this place, yes, but also to take the light of Christ into the world.

Let us go forth to share the Good News; and let us praise God for the risen Lord. Amen.

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