

Rev. Shannon Johnson Kershner
EASTER SUNDAY, March 23, 2008
John 20:1-18

It is a challenge to proclaim Easter in a Good Friday world, isn't it? Let's just look at what happened this past Holy week. Regardless if you have direct dealings with banking giant Bear Stearnes or have been hit by the sub-prime mortgage crisis yourself, my guess is that your checking account has been directly affected by rising gas and food prices and the decreasing power of the dollar. Regardless how you feel about the reasons for going to war in Iraq, this week marked the fifth anniversary of its official beginning and 3992 American servicemen and women who have been killed in its battle. Regardless how you feel about Senator Obama, he gave a historic speech that illustrated the ongoing tensions and pain of race relations in America. And regardless of how good your own physical or mental health might be, you probably know someone who battles cancer or the demon of deep depression. It can be a challenge to proclaim Easter in what seems to be 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." The week had begun with such promise and hope. But then, right before her eyes, it all fell to pieces. First, Judas betrayed him and Jesus was arrested. Then, while Jesus was at trial, Peter denied him and was of no help at all. And then, all those people who, 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." And now, Jesus was crucified, dead and buried in that tomb. When the Gospel writer John states, "**While it was still dark**," he is making a profound understatement of just how dark it was. Just how dark it felt to Mary Magdalene and the others. She must have thought it would be dark forever.

And yet, even **while it was still dark**, Mary decides 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 closure. Maybe she wanted to make sure it looked clean and cared for, to put out seasonal flowers. Or, maybe she just needed to get out of the grief that filled her home and get some fresh air, even if it was still early morning, dark air. John simply writes that early on the first day of the week, **while it is still dark**, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

And when she arrived, Mary was terrified by what she found. The stone was rolled away. Clearly, someone had desecrated the grave of her Jesus. Was it not enough that they had killed him? Was it not enough that they had humiliated him? Was it not enough that they had won? She was heartbroken and terrified. She ran back to the disciples who were all in hiding out of fear and guilt. "They have taken our Lord and I do not know where they have laid him."

Peter and the beloved disciple, **while it was still dark**, took off at once to go and see for themselves. But they did not stop at the entrance of the tomb, as Mary had. Peter went in, 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 all folded up, nice and neat. It did not make one bit of sense. Who takes off the burial clothes before removing a body? They did not understand. They believed the body was gone, but they had no explanation. It was still **so dark**. It was still so early. It still felt like Good Friday. So they returned back to the house with the others and locked the door behind them.

But Mary could not do it. She just could not leave. She wept and wept. A few days ago—they were singing Hosannas. A few days ago, it had all held such hope and promise. And now. Now, not only did she not have her living Jesus, but she did not even have his dead body. She stood there, weeping. **Her eyes had gotten used to the dark by now**, so she bent down to look inside for herself. And she saw what John says were two angels in white, sitting where Jesus' body had laid. But Mary, **having grown too used to the dark**, blinded in her grief, did not see them as angels. You can tell by her response to them. She did not know who they were, but they brought her no comfort.

Her eyes had gotten too used to the dark. She was living in a Good Friday world. You don't see angels in a Good Friday world. You see strangers. You see threat. You see people through the eyes of 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 a potential thief¹. Even two angels sitting in an empty tomb.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” In that moment, Mary shows a lot more restraint than I would show. When I live in a Good Friday world, I get a lot angrier than Mary appears to be. *Why am I weeping?* I am weeping because I just heard that children are showing up in the line at Stewpot because they have no where safe to live and nothing healthy to eat. *Why am I weeping?* I am weeping because we have families in this congregation who never know when the phone is going to ring or the doorbell is going to sound telling them that their loved one has died in battle. *Why am I weeping?* Because the political rhetoric keeps getting uglier and uglier and the emails circulating around about candidates keep getting meaner and meaner and the issues of race and gender and age seem to be dividing us more and more in our fear and our suspicion of each other. *Why am I weeping?* Because I am tired of cancer and white roses and the pain and shame that so many people carry deep within them. *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 responds to those strangers, it is like she just cannot handle the darkness anymore. She just cannot handle any more of her Good Friday world. She turns around to leave, and sees someone else standing there. Someone that John tells us is the risen Jesus. But Mary, well, **Mary's eyes had grown so used to the dark**. And now they were puffy and tired from all her crying. And the shroud of her Good Friday world was so thick upon her shoulders, that all she saw was a stranger to her, someone who looked suspicious, a possible thief. She is in such a Good Friday state that she cannot 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 front 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 can learn how to live with it. **Her eyes had grown so used to the dark** and she was so tired from crying.

And in his great goodness, Jesus knew that only one thing would stop her. He knew that only one thing would clear her eyes. For the sun had started to rise now, but Mary was still stumbling around in the dark. He had been set free from the grave, but Mary was still wanting to anoint his dead body. He had destroyed the power of death, but Mary was still captive to its delusions. Jesus knew that only one thing would clear her eyes. **“Mary. MARY.”** He called her name. 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 seeing in the dark**, and your heart is broken, and you are tired of weeping, only one thing will stop you

and bring you back into Easter life. You have to hear him say your name. “Mary. Carolyn. Tommy. Robin. Mary.”

Our risen Lord and Savior knows that the only way to shake us out of the Good Friday haze is to call our name. Maybe he does it with music that frees our souls. Maybe he does it with the hug or the prayer of a dear friend. Maybe he does it with the quick laughter of a little child. Maybe he does it with a dream or a vision or a real sense of hearing his voice calling.

But our risen Savior knows that the only way to shake us into Easter newness is to call our name one way or another. To open our eyes to the sun that is starting to rise. To help us remember that the darkness does not last forever. To remind us that it is precisely when we are in the darkness, surrounded by the shadows of Good Friday, eyes tired from weeping, souls tired from fighting, 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 at the empty tomb is our God is at work and Easter always rises**.

The risen Jesus calls out Mary’s name and her eyes are cleared and she recognizes him. And she calls out Rabbouni, my Lord. And then, then beloved Mary does what we all try to do in response to such powerful Easter moments. She goes from seeing resurrection, to confessing her faith, to trying to grab it and contain it with both handsⁱⁱ. Mary tries to embrace him. But Jesus says “No, stop holding on to me; stop clinging to me.” That is not what you do now.

When you have experienced Easter power and heard the risen Lord call your name one way or another, you can’t try to contain and control Jesus anymore. 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 buriedⁱⁱⁱ. 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 name and longs for them to see with their own eyes the power and the freedom of being an Easter people in 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^{iv}. I can’t prove it or explain it. But I believe it. I trust it. I have experienced it. I know it. For as an Easter people, we can testify that even in those times when we find that **our eyes have grown too used to the dark**, that Good Friday is trying to take hold of our imaginations, that the powers and principalities that deal in death seem to be all around and gathering strength, our testimony as a people who have heard God call our name is that **Easter always rises**. On the other side of death and pain is **always resurrection**. And all we are asked to do in response is to listen for our name, to clear our eyes, and to go and to tell.

Sisters and brothers, I have seen the Lord. For the Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ 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.

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

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

^{iv} Taylor, Barbara Brown. “Escape from the Tomb,” *Christian Century*, April 1, 1998.