

Early on the first day of the week, **while it was still dark**, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look<sup>[a]</sup> into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,<sup>[b]</sup> “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

***“While it was Still Dark”***

*“While it was still dark” (repeat)! I suppose it may be that the writer of these words, the apostle John, is here simply making note of the time of day, but as we’ve mentioned before, nothing that John seems to say is by accident. “While it was still dark...”. Hmmm. You know, darkness has historically been associated with evil, with the sinister, with crime, with horror, with the unknown, with death. Even our language reflects this understanding, “shady deals”, “nightmares”, “the dark side”, “black market”, “a dark soul”, “into the shadows”. Well, Mary came to the tomb “while it was still dark”, before dawn, before the sun had come up. It was when she, when any person, couldn’t have seen straightly, thought rightly or heard accurately. “It may have been the darkest hour (before the dawn),” James Baldwin reminds us.<sup>1</sup> We need it seems to consider that it was also dark because, for Mary, her world was just as violent, cruel and hopeless as it had been before she’d met Jesus.*

As Mary blinked back her tears and carefully placed each of her feet on the damp stone path so as to not misstep, she must have thought of the previous week. How horrible it had been. Not long after Jesus rode into Jerusalem, surrounded by “Hosannas”, things had fallen apart. Judas had betrayed him. Jesus was arrested, and while he was at trial, Peter, Peter denied him. And then, all those people who had earlier sung, “Hosanna”, got caught up in the bloodlust and the fear and the political power struggle. They started shouting, “crucify him”. And they did. Mary had seen Jesus, the One to whom she owed her life, suffer... the crown of thorns, the lashing, the nails, the blood, the jeering, the piercing. She’d witnessed his last breath and she’d helped place his body hurriedly in a borrowed tomb. She’d seen his disciples desert him, running for their lives, and she’d heard their conversation since, *“Jesus hadn’t been the Messiah...but we’d been so sure!”* *“Now what?”* Mary thought. It was as it was before. A very dark morning indeed.

And when Mary arrived at the tomb’s garden, it became even darker. The giant stone which had been put in front of the tomb had been rolled away. Mary was undone. Was it not enough

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<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin. <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&q=James+Baldwin&commit=Search> (accessed 4-8-20).

that they had killed him, humiliated him? Now, Jesus' body must have been stolen and discarded somewhere, alone and further disrespected. His body was all she had left! She returned to get Peter and John, who were hiding in fear, and they ran to the tomb and went in. They affirmed that it was empty, but ended up leaving. Mary, refusing to be anywhere else in her grief, remained standing outside the tomb, weeping, crying enormous tears of unspeakable sadness, and loss.... darkness.

Have we not all been where Mary was, bereft because of some horrible loss, aching grief, feeling a huge hole where love and hope and trust and joy used to be? Have we not been hurt, betrayed and abandoned by others? Have we not been faced with our own sin, our lack of faith, the pain we've caused others, our shame and guilt? And, have we not felt the weight of the world's sin, it's cruelty and violence and pervasive disregard for life, suffocating us, making us feel weak and fragile and powerless before it? Of course, we have. We know Mary's darkness. We recognize her tears. *(pause)*

But yet, there were evidences on that first Easter morning that Jesus, the Light of the world, had been at work in the dark. The grave clothes had been neatly folded and rolled up, not the typical sign of grave robbers, and two angels were sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at his head and one at his feet. Even though Mary did not see this, darkness is a domain where resurrection happens. *(repeat)* Jesus' resurrection had redeemed the darkness and made it a place of new life, new beginnings and hope. As Luke Powery says, "*Jesus' Easter light infiltrated the dark to reclaim it as a context for his ministry.*"<sup>2</sup>

At the close of our Tenebrae service, we did not leave in total darkness, but we relit one candle and read the first verse of John. "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the*

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<sup>2</sup> Luke Powery. "*Infiltrating the Dark*". <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/Infiltrating%20the%20Dark%2004-20-14.pdf>. (accessed 4-8-20).

*darkness did not overcome it.*”(Jn 1:1-5) I’ve always loved that part because it leads us from Good Friday into Easter morning. We are reminded that just as Jesus was there when the first light of Creation pierced the darkness when the earth was formless and void, Jesus, the light of the world, was there 2000 years ago in the darkness of death, in the tomb. Just as Jesus was present when all things were first given life, Jesus was and continues to be there when all things are given new life. Jesus came for this. It was/is his purpose. *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.* All of the evils in the world, all of our fears, our confusions, our feelings of inadequacy, all the things which threaten and pull us down, the things which cause pain and suffering and grief, all our sin...all which does violence against us, even the worst, death, he’s defeated. And if he’s defeated death, well, he can defeat it all.

Just as God said, “*Let there be light,*” Jesus ever so gently called Mary’s name, and her light went on and she saw clearly. The sun began to rise in her and she recognized him. The tears she was shedding must have fallen all the more, down her cheeks and onto the ground. But they were no longer tears of grief, hurt and fear. They were ones of pure joy, for she could live differently now. Her life was transformed in an instant. Evil did not after all have the last word. Life did. She could live with hope, not fear or shame or doubt because of what had happened, what had happened while it was still dark. “*Rabbouni,*” she said. “*Rabbouni!*”

(*pause*)You know, I’ve been thinking of what kind of Easter we would have this year, this very different year. I’ve thought first how important it is that our church buildings are empty, because with this, we are saving lives. I’ve thought too of how similar it is that the crowds of Jesus’ day were not filling sanctuaries either, but were instead isolated in their homes, most of them afraid, unsure of when they might go out again and what life would be like when they did. The first Easter did not happen with organ blasts and brass fanfares, with chancels full of lilies and choir processionalists, but with only a few people, certainly less than 10, in a quiet garden at a tomb emptied of death.

But I’ve also been thinking about something else, when challenged by colleagues. I’ve been thinking about the fact that when we’d come together on Easter morning, the coronavirus crisis

would not yet be over.<sup>3</sup> There still would be people dying by the hundreds, no, thousands each day in the world, and there would be the pall of dread that the worst impact of it had not yet hit central Texas. I have wondered what we'd feel when we'd hear and say THIS year that antiphonal liturgy which has been said and sung and screamed from the mountaintops...“Christ is risen, Christ is risen indeed.” What would we really feel this year? Well, I think I know...

*Have you not noticed what's been going on in the midst of all of this? People are helping each other. At-home parents are taking in the kids of working parents; people are dropping off casseroles on the porches of neighbors under quarantine; food trucks are delivering free food to kids locked out of school lunch programs.<sup>4</sup> People are using social media to sing uplifting songs together, some power and water companies are suspending shut-off notices; some landlords are forbearing on collecting rent, some internet providers are offering free service so everyone can stay connected; Some hotels are giving up rooms for the homeless to live in. A mom and pop company is working night and day in Waxahaxie to help make helmet-like devices which will aid in the ventilator shortage. New Yorkers are doing the 7 pm clap wherein they are cheering, clapping and honking horns out their apartment windows every night as a sign of unity and gratitude for health care workers. Fire departments are joining in by sounding their sirens outside their local hospitals. Teachers are driving through neighborhoods honking their car horns to say hello to their students. Hopeful messages are being chalked on sidewalks for walkers to see.*

It seems that Christ continues to be at work in the dark! He yet infiltrates it and claims it for his ministry. It does not overcome him. The sun is dawning. Morning is breaking. It's there for us to but see...and take part in it. We can let the light work through us. Love is proving once again stronger than hate, justice continues to win over injustice, and life shows itself to prevail over death. This truth, my friends, is God's glorious future informing our present. We

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<sup>3</sup> Cyndy Rigby. “God, Faith & the Coronavirus” [https://vimeo.com/402439420?fbclid=IwAR3dtlhxzAq\\_5LmlAzsJSSINz7dM\\_hFidhbrKHvBv-STOHbpDOQ6oEaqMW4](https://vimeo.com/402439420?fbclid=IwAR3dtlhxzAq_5LmlAzsJSSINz7dM_hFidhbrKHvBv-STOHbpDOQ6oEaqMW4) (accessed 4-2-20).

<sup>4</sup> Simcha Fischer. “The good and beautiful things I've seen amid the coronavirus pandemic.” <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2020/03/18/good-and-beautiful-things-ive-seen-amid-coronavirus-pandemic>. (accessed 4-8-20).

can boldly live as Easter people, transformed, unafraid and hopeful. We CAN and we SHOULD boldly respond to “Christ is risen” with “Christ is risen indeed”. Say it with me wherever you are. **“Christ is risen”...”Christ is risen indeed”**. **“Christ is risen”...”Christ is risen indeed”**. **“Christ is risen”...”Christ is risen indeed”**. HALLELUJAH! AMEN!

That promise is, more fully, two-fold. In the cross God promises that, while always available to us, God meets us especially where we most need God (and often least expect to find God): in hardship, struggle, loss, and death. Because of the cross, that is, no experience, no matter how difficult or awful, and no person, no matter how sinful or lost, is truly God forsaken, because God is always where we most need God to be. And in the resurrection, God promises that all the harsh realities of this life – hardship, struggle, loss, fear, disease, hunger, death – these realities – though painful they most certainly are – do not have the last word. Rather the resurrection promises that God’s light is more powerful than darkness, that God’s love is stronger than hate, and that the life God offers through Christ prevails over all things, even death itself.