

EASTER SUNDAY | JOHN 20:1-18

IN THE
right place



IN THE RIGHT PLACE

JOHN 20:1-18

I'm not really a morning person, but when I have a long drive ahead of me, I like to get an early start. Do you like to get going first thing, too, or do you prefer to begin your trips at a more civilised hour? When I was living in Toronto, and I mean downtown, shadow of the CN Tower, Toronto, if I was going to head north to visit my family, I would get up as early as I could and be on the road by about 6am, well before dawn. There is a lot of traffic in Toronto; by leaving in the dark, going from St. George Street to the 400 would take about 15 minutes instead of close to an hour. And it was kind of nice to drive from night into day.

I don't particularly like night-driving, mostly because of the oncoming headlights, but full dark or full day are easier travelling than in-between; where you've got a bit of light, but things are all grey and murky. Is that a weird-looking bunch of tall grass or a deer, poised to run? A pile of dirt or a wild turkey, ready to flap out in front of me? The only saving grace in all this is that because it's dawn and not dusk, you know it's going to be better and brighter, not darker.

In the Gospel of John, Mary starts out her day, walking alone in the dark.

It's a sorrowful image. As one of Jesus' closest friends and followers, Mary had been right in the thick of every good and bad thing that happened during the past week. The bittersweet, yet strangely fitting celebratory procession of Palm Sunday; Jesus' aggressive words and actions in clearing the Temple; that long last night together of a shared supper, conversation, prayer and Jesus humbly washing their feet. Then betrayal and arrest; Jesus' farce of a trial; the excruciating day of his death. Mary, we know, stood side-by-side with Jesus' mother, with another Mary, and with John, the beloved disciple. The four of them stood witness to Jesus' last words, his forgiveness and mercy, his love, and his suffering.

And then that special, extra-important Sabbath day; I imagine Mary and her companions – Jesus' mother and the other women, the disciples and followers – all together and in deep, disappointed, frightened mourning. In contrast to the rest of Jerusalem, for them, that Passover Sabbath must have been especially grim.

And yet, when Mary set out to go Jesus' tomb very early that morning, escaping, perhaps, the oppressive grief and heart-broken confusion of her companions, though it was still dark, it was already Easter.

How can it be Easter when it is still dark?

Darkness is not just a time of day or a stretch of hours, best suited for sleeping. Darkness can be something we experience, periods in our lives when the oppressive darkness of suffering, of grief, helplessness, anxiety, of physical, emotional or spiritual pain eclipses all our light.

Mary is walking in many shades of darkness, both literal and of the heart. Scripture and our own faith journeys teach us that the darkness is not dark to God; that God works in the dark, preparing the way for the light to come. The Gospel of John began – do you remember how? We usually read it on Christmas Eve – John began his telling of Jesus' life by re-telling the creation story centered on Jesus: the light shines in the darkness, John proclaims, and the darkness has not overcome it. Right now, though, for Mary and for us, as we accompany her on that dark walk to the tomb, the darkness seems to have won.

During that time between, that murky, hazy, just-before-sunrise time, it's hard to see and understand what's right in front of us. God may well be working in the dark, but Mary cannot see it. She finds the stone rolled back and assumes that the tomb has been emptied of its contents, and that yet another dark thing has happened: tomb robbers, or Romans, or the Jewish authorities have taken Jesus' body.

And Mary runs, through the murky greyness, back to the others, to get help from Peter and John. All three come flying back, John outstripping the others and arriving first, but stopped by the sight of the linen body wrappings on the ground. Bull-headed Peter, a little slower off the mark, marches straight in, and John eventually follows. It's John who describes the scene for us, carefully recounting the details, reporting the evidence without any of the artistic, literary touches we find elsewhere in this gospel. He believes that the body has been stolen, the author or his editor parenthetically acknowledging that they did not yet understand that Jesus had risen from the dead. The men go home; Mary, alone once more in the dim, pre-dawn light of the garden, weeps.

How can it be Easter when it is still dark?

That's the question Christians at some point always ask themselves, or get asked. How can we proclaim the good news of Christ risen for the world, when there is still so much darkness? It's a fair question.

Apart from the always-present darknesses of poverty, injustice, violence and abuse, sickness and disease, broken relationships and losing loved ones, we are all of us experiencing the collective grief of COVID-19. The loss of normalcy and connection, fears about the toll this is taking on everything from the economy to our mental well-being, the physical impact of a year of chronic stress, the helplessness and anxiety of not knowing what next week will bring, let alone next month. Getting together with loved ones, going to church, the freedom to go out and shop or have a meal at a restaurant, making plans for the future, travelling, economic and financial security...the things we thought of as the foundation of our lives have changed or fallen away. And we are left grieving and worried and trying to cope in the present, with the future impossible to predict.

Mary's foundation has been badly damaged, too, by the experiences she'd had over the past week. She is grief-stricken; probably afraid of arrest or abuse, like the rest of Jesus' followers.

Other early Christian writings from that time period reveal Mary to be as important a disciple as any of the twelve. But, unlike the twelve disciples, Mary's relationship with Jesus was different, running, perhaps a little deeper than teacher and friend. Setting aside the wild fictionalisation of Mary Magdalene's life, we know one thing with absolute certainty: Mary had been horribly, devastatingly ill for a long time, and Jesus made her whole. Knowing so personally what Jesus was capable of, the kind of divine, healing power that Jesus had...for him to die and then this further indignity of his body being stolen – her foundation has crumbled and fallen out from beneath her feet.

But it turns out that death had only briefly stifled hope; the light indeed shines in the darkness, and it is not overcome. There is a lovely moment of mistaken identity, where Mary assumes that Jesus is the gardener, followed by a still more beautiful moment when Jesus calls Mary by name, out of her darkness and grief and into the light of this new world, full of hope and abundant life. Jesus calls Mary, and then he sends her out, this first Easter morning preacher of the resurrection, to proclaim the good news.

And Mary runs, no longer grieving, no longer full of fear and confusion; this time, it's awe and wonder and joy – grace recognised – that sends Mary tearing out of the garden and back into the world once more.

The old order of death and suffering, of conquering empires and oppressive power, the old foundation of reality has fallen away and a new foundation of freedom and hope, built on the resurrection, has taken its place. Death is destroyed; hope restored. All of the history of God's people, from Genesis to Good Friday, no longer can be understood the same way; God in Christ has stepped into human history, broken into our reality, and upended it completely. The foundation of reality is no longer inevitably death, but new, abundant life.

In Christ, death does not have the last word; nothing is so broken that God cannot make it whole.

It's impossible to over-state how monumental Easter is for those who believe. Mary is tasked with being the first person to preach this amazing, world-changing good news to Jesus' followers. A huge responsibility, and a task that has consumed endless reams of scrolls and books and sermons in the attempt to do it justice.

But Mary doesn't say any of that.

Nothing about death or life, nothing about sin and suffering, nothing about hope or the reshaping of reality...Mary says, "I have seen the Lord."

The traditional Easter greeting between Christians is what we shared this morning: Christ is risen – He is risen indeed. And that's a wonderful tradition... but it's kind of impersonal. Mary makes a different claim: I have seen the Lord.

I'm sure she said more after that – picture Peter and John's reaction – they must've thought first that she'd found the body, so she must've had to explain more. But that's how she starts; this is how the good news of Jesus alive is first proclaimed in the world. "I have seen the Lord;" it's her own experience of Christ risen, her personal testimony. Her moment when Christ's light drove out her darkness, when hope came back into her life because of Jesus. When anxiety and grief and fear all fell away for her, because of Jesus.

Do we proclaim Easter like that?

Do we say, I have seen the Lord and this is how my life has changed? I have seen the Lord, and that's why I have hope, even in a terribly hard year? I have seen the Lord, and that's the reason I walk through the dark, rather than getting lost in it?

Or do we say, Jesus rose from the dead and expect that to make any kind of sense or impact at all?

Mary, understandably, I think, grabbed a hold of Jesus as soon as she worked out who he was; I suspect a bear-hug and more weeping might have followed, but Jesus told her – just as he tells us – that staying in the garden, clinging to him, is not what we're supposed to do. Instead, we are called to join Mary – heart and voice and feet – and go, making our own personal proclamation of the good news, living as Easter people, who find our hope and strength and life in the resurrection. The light of Easter morning drives out the darkness in every place, every moment and every person it touches. Christ is indeed risen; but we have seen the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.