

Sermon: Breaking through the Darkness
Easter Day, Year C
John 20:1-18

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“While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.”

For the Gospel writer John the image of light and darkness flicker throughout his story about Jesus. In this Easter account, Mary Magdalene steps out by herself “while it was still dark” to go to the body of Jesus. His death has caused immense grief. She expects to find his dead body. She wants to see and touch him one last time. The darkness John mentions isn’t about the actual night sky but alludes to the depths of her despair as she approaches the garden where Jesus’ body had been laid and the ensuing confusion. Her expectations are upended as she comes to an empty tomb. And she gets bounced around emotionally like a pinball in a machine.

But something breaks through her darkness. “Mary!” She hears her name. The voice that calls her name brings light to her life. Mary Magdalene turns around and after so much frustration and sorrow, she sees, really sees that it is Jesus, her Rabbouni, her great teacher standing before her. As John writes in his first chapter, *The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.* The light seems to be growing the longer MM is near Jesus. She now understands part of what is going on but not all! Just as she apparently grabs hold of Jesus, he tells her “Let go of me,” a more likely translation of the Greek. Surely she is wondering why she needs to let go? Is it that Jesus is teaching her a new thing, preparing her for a new life as he prepares to ascend into heaven? Is it that Jesus is preparing her for his and her ultimate destinies?

Without allowing her any time to bask in the reality of this divine encounter, Jesus commissions her as the first apostle, the one who is sent to tell the other disciples what she has seen. Jesus has entrusted and empowered a woman, someone without much social or religious power at the time, with this important mission. In this unimaginable future, it is up to her to share this news that Jesus is raised from the dead, that she has seen the Lord. This resurrection story is truly Mary’s commission story to tell the world that death is not the final word. Mary’s darkness has been pierced by the light of Jesus, which is the Light of God. And as a result, what she had expected to be a deeply sad ending in the death of Jesus is the next joyful beginning of new life.

What endings or deaths are you facing this Easter Day? Between the services this morning, I learned about the bombings in Sri Lanka, where hundreds have been killed or injured. This is a tragic ending of so many lives. Perhaps you are facing other endings, the end of a relationship, the end of a career, the end of some chapter in your life. Perhaps you expect life to go downhill from here. But what if God has other plans for you? Imagine God calling you by name, the way he called Mary. Remember how in hearing her name, Mary’s darkness was pierced and flooded with light. Can you imagine this Easter Day Jesus calling your name, and that God who has defeated death, is doing a new thing with and for you? Nestled in the midst of your uncertainty, heartache and woundedness, could new life await?

With Jesus' death and resurrection, God is teaching us to expect the unexpected, to step into the darkness to keep growing in faith. Like MM, we will not have the whole picture of who God is this side of our own grave but we can choose to follow Jesus, and to have confidence that God will never leave us to face our dark days alone. MM learned first-hand that death is not the final word. Love is the ultimate word of God. And today we rejoice that that ultimate word of love will never die. Jesus is alive! Can we let Jesus' love pierce our darkness?

Amen.