

SERMON TITLE: "While It Was Still Dark"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:1-18
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: April 12, 2020 (Easter) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Preachers everywhere have been trying to figure out how to talk about Easter this year. With sanctuaries empty, the coronavirus killing more than 100,000 people worldwide, and the pandemic affecting everything we do, it's much harder to proclaim the good news of resurrection.

One article I read this week was written by a Catholic religious worker named Rose Marie Berger. She wrote, "In 2005, on a spring trip to El Salvador, I wasn't expecting to find Easter. It's definitely a 'Good Friday' kind of country, one that has carried the cross for a long time." Then she went on to tell about the 1981 massacre of 900 men, women, and children in the village of El Mozote. She was convinced that "there was nothing . . . of resurrection in [that] place." Because the massacre was denied and covered up, two decades went by with no positive action. But finally, the persistent voice of a lone witness was heeded, the mass graves were opened, and the truth came out to the world. Quoting one of the grave workers, Ms. Berger noted that the village of El Mozote became "'a place with a peculiar, yet complicated, sense of hope.'"¹

As deaths in the U.S. have topped 20,000, medical equipment and supplies are in desperately short supply, and millions of people have become unemployed—even we Christians in the United States face Easter with "a peculiar, yet complicated, sense of hope." While the glad alleluias of Easter certainly ring, and while we joyfully sing "Christ the Lord is risen today," there's a hint of darkness that hangs over Easter this year that must be acknowledged. That's why—instead of Matthew's "as the first day of the week *was dawning*," Mark's "very early . . . *when the sun had risen*," or Luke's "*at the early dawn*"—I chose to focus on the peculiar words of hope found in the Gospel of John: "Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb."

I know many of us are eager for the sun to rise. Many of us can't wait for the daylight at the end of the tomb-shaped tunnel to appear, so we can return to our church pews and our normal life activities. But the best scientific and medical wisdom is that, before we can all rush back into that light of day, we have to acknowledge that right now, we're still in the dark. While our collective social distancing has made incredible progress in flattening the curve of sickness and death, and while amazing efforts are being made to research and develop tests and treatments, there is still so much we don't know. There is still so much we have to figure out. We have to be patient, because this Easter story and its message of life is going to take some time to unfold.

1--JOHN'S EASTER DARKNESS & OURS

As we think about Mary Magdalene going to the tomb while it was still dark, we have to wonder, why did she go so early? Was it because she couldn't sleep? Did she stay awake all night worrying? Was she having bad dreams? Like the reports we hear of people who are sick with the coronavirus, did Mary wake up in the wee hours of the night because of a fever? Or did she go to the tomb so very early because she wanted to avoid being seen? Was she afraid for her own safety? She and all Jesus' disciples had certainly been through some traumatic days. Betrayal, violence, death, shock, grief, and the great risk of more danger loomed darkly over them.

Over the past few weeks, we've been feeling some of those feelings. Some of the initial shock of this pandemic is wearing off, but the trauma is very real for hundreds of thousands who have been sick and lost loved ones to death, for the valiant doctors and nurses who have worked themselves to physical and emotional exhaustion, and for the millions and millions who have been laid off from their jobs and are now suffering loss of vital income. In places like Detroit and Chicago, it's become clear that African Americans are dying at far greater numbers than their population would indicate. Even in relatively healthy states like Utah, we worry about getting sick, and we know that we have to be very careful if we venture out. I suppose one of the reasons grocery stores have set their senior-citizen-only

hours first thing in the morning is that not everyone likes to get up and out so very early. Maybe it's safer to hunt for essential groceries if you get going while it's still dark.

2--THE LIGHT COMES IN THE DARKNESS

But while Mary's day began while it was still dark, we know the sun did eventually begin to peek over the horizon. As Mary ran to tell the disciples what she'd seen, the light of community began to grow. Now she had Simon Peter and another disciple running to the tomb with her. They may have had some social distance between them as they ran, but Mary wasn't alone. Like using a Zoom meeting or Facebook Live worship, like calling her family on the telephone, Mary now had the support, encouragement, and perspective of her friends and companions.

The light of Easter was increasing a bit more as the men arrived at the tomb, but even then, it took some time. The first disciple to arrive looked into the tomb from the outside, possibly reluctant to risk what or who might have been there in the dark. When Peter caught up, he went inside and saw the linen cloths that had previously been wrapped around Jesus' body. Then the other disciple also entered the tomb and saw. Yes, now he too believed what Mary had told them. Jesus' body was gone. But, how and why they didn't know. As of yet, none of them understood that Jesus must rise from the dead. They were still in the dark about that when the male disciples returned to their homes.

John tells us, however, that Mary kept at this search for meaning. She began Easter morning in the dark, and she was still in the dark about what exactly had happened. But she didn't want to go home that way. So she stood outside the tomb, weeping. While she was there, looking into the tomb through tear-blurred eyes, she saw two angels in white, sitting where Jesus' body had been. Do you wonder if those angels were wearing PPE, personal protective equipment? Did they have masks and gloves and gowns? Or were they using plastic face shields produced on 3D printers borrowed from the University of Utah library?

The angels asked Mary why she was weeping, and she told them that she didn't know where they had taken Jesus' body. This point in the story makes me think of a photograph I saw a couple days ago. In New York City, where COVID-19 has killed over 5000 people, they had made a huge trench and were filling it with coffins of unclaimed bodies. Maybe someday when the absolute chaos and horror calms down, someone will wonder where their grandpa or mother or brother was buried, and the truth will lie in that giant mass grave. We certainly can understand why Mary was weeping.

3—THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE RESURRECTION

When Mary turned her gaze away from the darkness of the tomb, she saw a man she thought was a gardener. The increasing light was bringing Jesus into clearer focus. But she still didn't recognize him until he called her by name and she could recognize the voice that had taught her so many important truths.

As any of us would have wanted to do, Mary immediately tried to embrace Jesus. But he pulled back, telling her that she couldn't hold onto him. She needed to keep a protective social distance. She needed to allow Jesus to ascend. Go, and tell the disciples, said Jesus, so that they would know that he was with God the Father. And, so, Mary did. Now enlightened by resurrection knowledge and hope, she went and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord.

Unlike Matthew's 10 verses, Mark's eight verses, or Luke's 12 verses, John takes 18 long verses to tell his Easter story. For sure, it reaches the important message of hope that Jesus is risen from the dead. Absolutely, it lifts our hearts with the assurance that Jesus lives now with God the Father. But this peculiar, yet complicated, story of hope begins while it was still dark and reminds us that seeing resurrection takes time. If you're feeling the darkness, remember the words with which we began this service. In our Call to Worship, we read from John chapter one: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to tell a story that was in the news a couple weeks ago. As the scramble for N95 respirator masks frantically began, a brick mason at the National Cathedral remembered that there were some N95 face masks stored in the crypt of the Washington DC church. “The masks were purchased back in 2006, when the bird flu known as H5N1 had the world on edge. They were meant to allow the cathedral’s clergy to ‘provide pastoral care without putting their own health at risk’ . . . But after the bird flu had dissipated without causing much damage in the [United States], the masks were put in storage and forgotten about.”²

After checking with the manufacturer and the Center for Disease Control to make sure the masks would still provide effective coverage after fourteen years, the Cathedral brought the 5000 masks up out of the dark crypt and into the light of day. They donated 2000 of them to Children’s National Hospital and 3000 to Georgetown University Hospital. At a time when Washington DC and the world desperately needed protective gear for healthcare workers, there it was available to help.

“While it was still dark” may seem like a difficult and long time. But, in God’s power and with our patience, even from the darkness comes the light of life. Yes, Christ is risen. Alleluia! Amen!

¹ “A Peculiar Hope,” April 2008, <https://sojo.net/magazine/april-2008/peculiar-hope> .

² <https://www.cnn.com/2020/03/25/politics/coronavirus-national-cathedral-donates-masks-trnd/index.html>