

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Resurrection and the Life: The Dawning of Resurrection"
SERMON TEXT: John 20:1-18 (and John 11:25-26)
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 31, 2024 (Easter) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

As Tim read to us earlier, Jesus is the resurrection and the life. Jesus said that, to Martha, and then he demonstrated it by raising her brother Lazarus from the grave. You might suppose then that Jesus' resurrection ability had been well proven and accepted. You might think that Jesus' followers would have understood who he was and what was about to happen.

But the Easter story doesn't begin with the bright light of understanding. Instead, according to John 20:1, the story began "while it was still dark." The other gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke put a brighter spin on the situation with phrases like "at early dawn," and "very early . . . when the sun had risen." Yes, eventually the sun did come up and shine, and everyone could sing, "Hallelujah! He is risen indeed!" But, according to John's Gospel, Easter morning began "while it was still dark," and it took a while for everything to come to light.

On this Easter morning, I invite you to consider this Easter story in John 20. Let's see what it might mean for us to experience the dawning of resurrection.

1—FROM DARKNESS TO DAWNING WITH JESUS

As you know, the lead up to Easter had some seriously dark elements. Even as Jesus celebrated the Passover with his disciples, he knew it would be his last supper with them. Even as they shared bread and wine, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him and that Peter would deny him. Later that night, Jesus went to the garden and prayed with heavy anxiety about what he should do. Then the soldiers came to arrest him. Over the next hours of that night, Jesus was questioned by the chief priests and interrogated by Pilate the governor. Jesus was beaten, mocked, and humiliated by the soldiers who dressed him up and pushed a crown of thorns into his head. Then

they nailed him to a cross to die. As Jesus hung there, various ones continued to taunt him, even while Jesus' mother and others agonized with him until his last breath.

One bright spot, where the resurrection sun shone through just a little, was the donation of a new tomb. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus helped take down Jesus' body and prepare it for burial. But then night came, and darkness descended once again.

When Mary Magdalene went to the tomb early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, she had no expectation of any light moments. She was going there to tend to the dead body of Jesus, her dear teacher and friend. She was going there to feel her grief and express her sorrow. But to her surprise and dismay, in that darkness before dawn, Mary found that the stone had been moved, and Jesus' body was gone. So she ran to tell Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved.

As we imagine this story, we can see the sun rising a tiny bit more. Now Mary wasn't alone in the dark. She had friends to support her. But even then, Peter and the other disciple were slow to enter the tomb. We can't blame them. Even if the sun was rising a bit outside, who knew what they would encounter in the darkness of the tomb? In that time before flashlights, it's no wonder they could see just enough to believe that Jesus' body was gone, but still not see sufficiently well to understand that Jesus must rise from the dead.

John 20:10 tells us that the men went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. By now, some time had passed. Surely the sun had come up over whatever hill there might have been. Maybe that dawning is what helped Mary see the two angels in white sitting where Jesus' body had been. The angels asked Mary why she was weeping. And then, when she turned around, there was Jesus. But even then, Mary didn't recognize him and thought he was the gardener. Only when Jesus called her by name did Mary recognize who he was. When Jesus told her to go tell his disciples that he was ascending to God, that's when the light dawned clearly enough that Mary could go and announce to the disciples that she had seen the Lord.

It wasn't easy for the disciples to believe what Mary told them. But, fortunately, the dawning of resurrection wasn't over yet. John's Gospel tells us that in the hours and days ahead, Jesus appeared to the disciples hidden behind a locked door. A week later, the risen Lord appeared to Thomas who needed to see the wounds in Jesus' body. Then Jesus appeared to a bunch of the disciples when they were out fishing in a boat, and Jesus cooked breakfast for them on the beach. Notably, the disciples had been fishing in the dark of night, and they saw Jesus on the beach just after daybreak. What had happened to Jesus wasn't easy to understand, but each appearance added some light. Each appearance aided in the dawning of resurrection.

2—FROM DARKNESS TO DAWNING WITH US

Like Mary Magdalene, Peter, and the other disciples—each of us comes to the tomb of Jesus in some measure of darkness. Maybe we've suffered poor physical or mental health. Maybe a loved one has died. Maybe we've had trouble at work. Maybe our marriage or other intimate relationship is on the rocks. Maybe we've had a string of bad luck that makes us feel cursed. Maybe we're feeling the anxiety of the world around us with climate change, wars, and political division. Maybe our Christian faith has gotten a little rusty for lack of practice. Maybe we've had spiritual questions and struggled to believe.

Of course, even in our darkness, there have been some moments of light. When a friend came alongside and offered encouragement. When a boss or colleague acknowledged our skills and hard work. When someone said thank you, made space for us in difficult traffic, or forgave us when they didn't have to. When people prayed for us and sent us cards in the mail. When enough time had passed to allow the wounds to heal. When enough good things had happened to counter the bad ones. When purpose was gained. When rest and relief allowed for restoration. When faith was reborn and practiced, or maybe practiced first and then reborn. When the struggle to believe was shared with others who likewise asked lots of questions on the journey of faith together.

The glory of Easter is that the dawning of resurrection is possible not only for Lazarus and Jesus, but for all who believe. What was it Jesus said to Martha? “Those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

3—AN EXAMPLE OF RESURRECTION DAWNING

A couple weeks ago, I went to see the movie *Cabrini*. The movie was based on the true story of Mother Francis Xavier Cabrini, an Italian nun who was sent to New York City to minister to the impoverished Italians who had immigrated there in the late 1800s. Mother Cabrini was an amazing woman. I highly recommend the movie and hope you get a chance to see it.

Thinking about Mother Cabrini caused me to remember another movie about another Catholic saint. This one was from El Salvador in Central America. Archbishop Oscar Romero was also an advocate for the poor. His efforts to seek human rights for the impoverished of his country gained him great solidarity with the common people. But Romero’s many sermons and actions of Christian compassion also gained him powerful enemies. Because he believed and preached that the gospel of Jesus Christ requires us to advocate for the poor, Archbishop Romero was shot and murdered on March 24, 1980, while he was standing at an altar celebrating mass in a hospital chapel.

March 1980 was a dark time in El Salvador. A civil war was going on. The poor were struggling to survive. And now their spiritual leader had been assassinated. But Archbishop Romero had anticipated that he could be killed. And he had, in a sense, prepared his people. About a month before he died, knowing that he was at risk, Romero said, “If God accepts the sacrifice of my life, may my death be for the freedom of my people. A bishop will die, but the Church of God, which is the people, will never perish. I do not believe in death without resurrection,” he said. “If they kill me, I will rise again in the people of El Salvador.”

Thirty-five years later, in 2015, Oscar Romero was canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church. And, today, he continues to live on as a light dawning in the darkness to many in Latin America and around the world who find hope and truth in his understanding of the Christian faith.

Of course, it isn't just through movie-worthy Catholic nuns and bishops that the Christian message lives on. The teachings of Jesus continue through everyday Christians everywhere who profess and practice this Christian faith tradition of caring for those in need. In every place where Christians find and proclaim the light of Christ in the midst of the darkness, the dawning of resurrection happens, and the words of Jesus resound: "I am the resurrection and the life."

CONCLUSION

Several months ago, when I first read about the solar eclipse that's going to happen on April 8, I decided immediately to order a box of certified eclipse glasses. I thought they would make a great Easter illustration. When you put on the glasses, everything seems dark. But when you look skyward, you can safely look at the sun for brief amounts of time. Here in Utah, we won't be able to see a total eclipse. The most we'll see is about 47%. And that's assuming the sun isn't already covered by clouds. But, since there won't be another total eclipse in North America until 2044, I thought we should make the most of this one. So, on April 8, between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m., as the moon rolls over the sun and darkens the earth and then rolls off the sun, you can use these eclipse glasses to look skyward and think about how light came on that Easter day when the stone was rolled away from the tomb. The dawning of resurrection helped the disciples and us to realize that Jesus is the resurrection and the life.