

Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:1-18

She went to the tomb on Easter morning according to John, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark. And the darkness, which John, in his first chapter tells us has been dispelled by the light that is coming into the world, sets the mood for the story. In fact, this deep darkness pervades what happens, shrouds it, if you will, until that moment when someone finally believes what they are seeing. And the implication is that all is darkness until faith comes.

We don't know why Mary Magdalene came that morning in the darkness before the dawn. Maybe she went to Joseph's Garden because she was grief stricken, like we all are the day after the burial, and we go back to see that the grave is closed and the stone is there, and everybody did what they were supposed to do at the cemetery. We go out to the grave to make sure everything's right, whatever that means, because nothing is right the day after the burial.

It's final on the days after the burial. The relatives are starting to go home, the flowers are wilting, the potato salad that the neighbors brought is starting to run out, his clothes in the closet are more sad to see now that's he's no longer there to fill them. And life feels suspended between what once was, and what never will be again.

So you go out to the cemetery to be closer to him, to take some daffodils or tulips, because that's about all that's left now, the flowers, and the memories, and the darkness of spirit that weighs around you like a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes.

When Mary Magdalene got to the tomb, she found the stone had been rolled away. And with just that much, without even looking inside, she was scared out of her wits. She ran to get Peter and the Beloved Disciple so that they could come and do what she could not, look inside that tomb. It was still dark at that point. Still too early for the light to shine.

Maybe they took lanterns with them, or maybe they just ran in the dark along the path, but Peter and the other disciple made straightway to the tomb. The other disciple bent down in the doorway and looked inside where he saw the linen wrappings, but he did not go in. Peter, on the other hand, went into the tomb and inspected; he saw the linen cloth where Jesus' head had laid, except now it had been rolled up and folded separately from the longer shroud. When the other disciple went into the tomb, he didn't go through things with the same fine-tooth comb as Peter.

John simply says, he saw and believed. And as he did, the dawn began to break ever so slightly. But then, in what might be the most colossal letdown recorded in the scriptures, John reports the two of them, Peter and the Beloved Disciple, *returned to their*

homes. Even though the other disciple saw and believed, they still returned to their homes.

No excitement, no running back to tell the others. Just the minimalist notation, “Then the two disciples returned to their homes.”

Mary, on the other hand, was left behind to sort things out for herself. And in the next movement we understand her frame of mind. She believes that body snatchers have been to the tomb and taken away Jesus’ body. It’s the only logical conclusion. Soldiers perhaps, or even members of the Temple police at the behest of the Sanhedrin have stolen Jesus’ body. Surely they were capable of doing this as a means of removing any possibility of making him a martyr or leaving a place where the faithful might come and light candles or leave notes, or make a shrine. It would make good sense to steal his body, she thought. One more insult inflicted on a good and innocent man.

So imagine her surprise when someone else was in the garden with her. Someone she mistakenly took to be the gardener. “Woman why are you weeping,” he asked, almost as if he really didn’t understand, as if everything was starting fresh and new.

Mary answers, “They have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.”

“Who are you looking for?” he asked, sounding as if he really didn’t know.

And then, he called her name, “Mary.” And she, recognizing the timber and sound of his voice, realized who he was and cried back to him, “Rabbouni!” which means Teacher. Jesus then tells her not to hang onto him, for he has not yet ascended to his Father. But go and tell the others that he will soon ascend to God. So she runs and tells the disciples, “I have seen the Lord,” thus becoming the first preacher of the first Easter sermon on the first Easter Sunday.

It is an amazing account, and John is not finished. In subsequent stories, he remembers that Jesus comes to the disciples on several other occasions as well. And while they are at first fearful and doubting, they eventually recover their faith and bear the good news of God’s love to the world.

Now the question, of course, is what are we to make of this story? What are we to make of its claims of life that is more powerful than death, and love that is stronger than hate?

Thomas Long, professor emeritus at Emory University, says that at every Christian funeral there are two preachers. One preacher is death himself, who by the very presence of the casket and the funeral director and the hearse and the sadness in the air is preaching a sermon we have all heard before. “Once again I’ve won. You left the back door open and I snuck in again with the cancer or the car accident or the heart attack...and I’ve claimed another victory. You thought you could get out alive, but you can’t. In the end, I get everyone, and life is meaningless and love is powerless and it’s all futile, like rolling a stone uphill only to have it come rolling back down again.” That’s death’s familiar message.

The other preacher at the funeral is the minister who says, “Life is eternal, and love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, in fact love

never ends. Neither death nor life nor angels nor principalities, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. So where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?" That's faith's message.

And if those are the dueling preachers at the funeral home, how much more are they the dueling preachers on this day of resurrection? We have seen so much of the power of death on earth, and his sway over life. The horrors of war in Ukraine, millions of deaths from COVID, natural disasters, senseless killings, schoolyard massacres, all signs of death's power in the world. He is a fearsome enemy and he would like us to be afraid of him.

And as we come to church today, we know he has taken the dearest of our hearts from us. The ones we have lost, the dear family and friends who were so much of what life is to us, who are no longer here and whose absence we grieve. Death steals our most treasured loves and shakes our confidence in living.

We have, after all, sat on the mourner's bench at the funeral and remembered those we loved and wondered if we would ever see them again some day beyond time and memory. And that's part of why we have come today, hoping against hope that what Mary discovers in the darkness of the dawn on that first Easter morning may just be true.

"Who are you looking for?" the Lord asks Mary. And maybe that's what we need to ask ourselves too. Who is it that we come today to see in the garden, there at the cemetery, there at the tomb. Because if our eyes are fixed on the things of death, then that is what we'll see, that yellow jaundiced face, that thin body, that skeletal cheekbone, that failing gait. He wants us to think about those things, and nothing else. Old Scratch with his dark cape and his darker purpose.

Do you remember that scene in the Wizard of Oz where Dorothy and the Scarecrow and the Lion and the Tin Man are finally in the presence of the Wizard, and the Wizard who is behind the curtain tries to scare them away. There are pyrotechnics, and thunderous noises, fire bellowing up, and a loud voice coming through the speakers saying "Do not arouse the wrath of the great and powerful Oz! Come back tomorrow." Dorothy and her friends quake at the loud voice and visions of fire.

But the more the Wizard behind the curtain becomes agitated, the more the curtain shakes, and the little dog, Toto, intrigued by the shaking pulls the curtain open revealing the Wizard pulling levers and yelling into the microphone, and jamming gears and pressing buttons, and gesticulating wildly. "Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain," the Wizard says as his game is exposed. Well, that's exactly what is happening today. The curtain is pulled back on Death's game.

All the time we thought Death had the upper hand, when in reality it is God who does, from whom all things are made, and to whom all things return.

What this day's victory establishes once and for all is that Death's frightening pyrotechnics and wild gesticulation is the final dying burst of a cornered and defeated enemy. He may have a few arrows left in his quiver, but the outcome is now sure. Death is defeated and what we see is the curtain pulled back to expose the fraud for what it is. Because of Christ's victory over death, we now know that God's love is greater than the

world's hate, God's healing is stronger than the world's brokenness, God's power for life is greater than the power of death to destroy. The light that streams from Joseph's garden shines so brightly now that we may see our world, our neighbors, and ourselves in the light of Jesus Christ our risen Lord. He comes to us, in unexpected ways, and we thought he was the gardener; not recognizing who he was, even though the world is shot through