

“While It Was Still Dark”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

April 4, 2021 – Easter Sunday

Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18

It was still dark when Jesus’ friend Mary of Magdala came to the garden tomb, where the body of Jesus had been laid after having been taken down from the cross that stood atop the hill outside of Jerusalem called Golgotha, meaning Skull.

It was still dark, early on that Sunday morning, but not too dark for her to recognize upon coming to the garden that the stone that had been placed in front of Jesus’ tomb, sealing it shut after his crucifixion just two days before, had been removed.

It was still dark, but she could just make out the path that led from the garden to Jerusalem, where she ran to wake up Peter and the Beloved Disciple from their sleep and to tell them that the body of their teacher had been removed.

It was still dark when they raced back to the tomb to find it empty of all but the cloths that had enshrouded Jesus at his burial, where they remained, the cloths that covered his head being neatly rolled up and set aside.

It was still dark when the disciples went away, leaving Mary alone at the tomb, where she shed bitter tears as she considered the bleak shadows that her friend and teacher had already faced that week, shadows of betrayal and desertion, of hatred and violence, and of suffering and death.

It was still dark, when, with tears still blurring her eyes, she could make out the forms of two figures in the tomb wearing white, who questioned why she was weeping.

It was still dark when she told them that the body of Jesus had been taken away in what she thought was yet another shadowy indignity.

It was still dark when she turned from the tomb and could see another figure right in front of her, a figure she assumed was the caretaker of the garden tombs.

It was still dark when this unrecognized person spoke to her, asking why she was weeping and for whom she was looking.

But it was still dark. Though the resurrected one was right in front of her, speaking with her, in the dark gloom of that morning, she could not perceive that it was Jesus, that is, until he called her by name. And then, for Mary, the light of dawn broke through her darkness and began to shine.

And Mary began to shine, even while it was still dark around her. With joy and in faith, she held on to her resurrected teacher, until, in faith and in love for her friends, she let him go so that she could go and proclaim the bright good news that she had seen the resurrected Christ to the other disciples, who were then still suffering the gloomy darkness of despair. And as Mary proclaimed her joyous message, as the first witness of the resurrected Christ and as Christ's first missionary, the light of Christ came through her and shined upon the other disciples as well.

Through Mary's message, the light also shines upon us this Easter morning. For the good news of Mary, that even while it was still dark, she could see the Lord, echoes through the ages and gives us hope for seeing the light of Christ breaking through and overcoming our own

darkness, replacing our own sadness and mourning for the shadows we experience and see around us with the joyous celebration of new life.

Sometimes, experiencing the risen one in the midst of the shadows is not easy, and it takes all the senses. For Mary, she only recognized her shepherd when she heard him called her by name. The other disciples come to believe only when Jesus later appeared to them and they saw his wounded hands and side. One of them, Thomas, only recognized the risen Christ when he was able to touch those wounds.

For us, living in the midst of our own shadows, it can also be difficult to perceive and believe that Christ has risen until we can confirm this through our own senses. But, in faith, we can experience the light of the risen Christ shining among us. We can hear the voice of our shepherd when we gather together and recite his words that comfort and challenge us. We can see Christ walking and working among us when we journey and labor together with still-wounded others who themselves bear the light of God's Spirit. We can touch and smell and taste the body of Christ when we gather together at the table and share this holy meal of communion.

And when we do experience the presence of Christ among us, we can proclaim with joy, "Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!" Like Mary the Magdalene, we can be evangelists, angels offering reports of this life-changing good news, when we share this hopeful, bright message with others living in their own darkness.

Let us follow the lead of our sister Mary in doing just that, sharing the good news that Christ has risen and lives among us. And throughout the world, especially in its darkened places, let us work to grow the realm of the resurrected Christ, where the light of love and life cast out the shadows of brokenness and despair. For while it is a bright,

beautiful Easter morning, we know that there is still much darkness that needs to be displaced with God's light. So let us shine God's light!

Let us proclaim Christ risen through sharing meals with the hungry.

Let us witness to God's life-building power by creating experiences for our children and youth to share joyful, life-growing moments together, like we did earlier this morning with our Easter egg hunt.

Let us reach out and offer messages of love to our elders, many of whom are living on this Easter morning in the shadows of isolation and loneliness.

Let us speak out against every injustice and stand in support of those belittled and battered by vile words and acts of hatred.

Let us show those with the shadows of violence in their hearts that the way of love is always the better way, that the way of love is the best way.

And as we witness and work together as angels of light, God's messengers of love, may we experience resurrection life transforming the world, and may we sense God's abundant resurrection life welling up within us and transforming us as well. Amen.