

Sermon – “Daybreak”

Scripture Reading –John 20:1-18

Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Listen to the events of the first Easter morning as recorded in the Gospel of John, chapter 20.
Hear now God’s Holy Word.

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that Christ must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord;" and she told them that the Risen Christ had said these things to her. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "Daybreak"

The text: Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb... John 20:1

Let us pray. God of daybreak, thank you for meeting Mary that first Easter morn when the world changed. In the dawning of this day, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

This past Maundy Thursday, many of us gathered safely under the ark in this sanctuary to commemorate Christ's last supper with his disciples, to bear witness to the solemn stripping of our chancel, and to attend to the seven words Christ spoke from the cross interwoven with liturgy and music. In quiet solitude, we walked out of this holy space into the darkness of the night yearning for a ray of insight into the events that took place two millennia ago.

Today we meet Mary at the tomb early on the first day of the week while it is still dark before the first ray of daybreak. Mary's meeting of the Risen Savior at daybreak happens at an in-between place. In Celtic spirituality, the in-between places, those places of transition are symbolized by doorways, shorelines, the forest's edge, dusk, and dawn. These are places of power, where the extraordinary is possible and where the bonds of reality and the everyday are shed. Because in-between places are places of light, they are sometimes referred to as a liminal space. The word "liminal" comes from the Latin word *limens*, meaning literally, "threshold."

When Mary encounters the Risen Christ at daybreak, it is not only the threshold of a new day, but also the threshold of a new world, a new understanding of the world in which we live and the One who created that world. When Mary encounters the Risen Christ at daybreak, it is not only the threshold of a new day but also the threshold of a new understanding of how God is present in our lives, not only as our Creator, but also as our Redeemer and Sustainer.

At the threshold of this daybreak, in this in-between place, Mary does not yet understand the deeper import of the day. She is mourning the loss of her beloved and wants to hold on to what she knows, the tenderness and bond with this One who has been her teacher and friend.

In his poem "Daybreak," John Donne, renaissance scholar, poet, and cleric within the Church of England, captures the depth of sorrow and loss that are a part of losing a loved one:

STAY, O sweet and do not rise!
The light that shines comes from thine eyes;
The day breaks not: it is my heart,
Because that you and I must part.
Stay! or else my joys will die
And perish in their infancy.

Characteristic of Donne's poetry and our Christian theology, "Daybreak" presents the paradox which juxtaposes the joy of love and the sorrow of loss.

In this poem, John Donne explores the intense emotions upon the departure of one's beloved. The poem's brevity and direct address convey a sense of urgency and vulnerability. Not unlike Mary, the protagonist pleads with the one departing to remain, as the beloved's eyes illuminate the darkness like the dawn. The beloved's presence is a matter of life and death.

In Mary's touch outside the tomb that daybreak, she is saying to the Risen Christ, "Stay, or else my joys will die." Yet, Jesus needed to let Mary know he could not stay. She does not yet understand that it is in his departure that her joy will be complete. Christ's presence which illuminates the darkness can only come by way of the Holy Spirit after he ascends; that presence can only come in Christ's physical absence. Part of the paradox of the Christian faith is that Christ's absence in the tomb is as significant as his presence on the cross because just as we find life in Christ's death, we discover Christ's presence only in his physical absence.

Instead of holding on to a relationship they treasured, Jesus asks Mary to let go and to prepare the disciples so they, too, can begin to understand the threshold of this new day and the meaning of Christ's words prior at their last meal. *I tell you the truth (Jesus said); it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (the Holy Spirit) will not come to you. If I go, I will send this one to you who will teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said to you.*

As Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen explains in his book The Living Reminder: *One of the mysteries of life is that memory can often bring us closer to another than can physical presence. In memory we see each other in a new way.* This is what Jesus was trying to say before his departure.

The great mystery of Easter is *that God entered intimacy with us not only by Christ's coming, but also by Christ's leaving. Indeed, it is in Christ's absence that our intimacy is so profound we can say Christ dwells in us and experience Christ as the center of our being.*

Today, we affirm with Christians around the world that death is not the last word, that God's love is greater than the world's hatred, and that the love of God cannot be contained in a tomb. Today, we celebrate the paradox of our faith: joy in sorrow, life in death, presence in absence. Today, we join Mary outside the tomb, at daybreak, proclaiming the resurrection. Halleluiah, Amen!