

“The Son Is Up!”

Read Acts 10:34-43

Peter announces in a sermon that though we put Jesus to death, God raised him on the third day.

Read 1 Cor. 15:1-11

Here, in Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth, Paul gives a summary of the good news that he received, the good news of the resurrection and the appearances of the risen Christ.

The Gospel Lesson for today is read from John 20:1-18

Hear the words from the Jesus’ beloved disciple, John:

Read John 20:1-18

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the sweet surprise of Easter morning. We are thankful that when you arose from your sleep of death, you didn’t go immediately to heaven, but instead you went and visited people. This visit of love reminds us that it was for us that you died. You come to us, you meet us wherever we are, sometimes in the dark of night, sometimes in the light of day. Help us, Lord Jesus, when you come to us, to see you, to understand you, and to hear your voice call our name. Amen.

Intro:

Today, the Church celebrates Easter, the highpoint of our liturgical year. With joyous music, Easter lilies, choirs, and the color white, we proclaim the great triumph of Christ’s rising from the dead. The wilderness of Lent is behind us. The tomb is empty and a bright, new day has dawned. “He is Risen! He is Risen, indeed!”

Not to sound too much like DJ Pauly D but, “I do LOVE Easter this time of year!” I love the communal joy and celebration of Easter morning services. I love the music, the vestments,

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the crowds, and the lights. I love the triumphant and public praise of Jesus’s historic and miraculous rising.

But as I sat through this Holy week reading and listening again to the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s betrayal, death, burial, and resurrection, what I noticed was something quieter and more mysterious than the full-on joy I experienced at church growing up. I noticed that I had unknowingly stepped into the Jewish bereavement process with Mary Magdalene and Jesus’s disciples. Phase one of the process began from the very moment we heard of Jesus’s death until the conclusion of his secret burial in the tomb. Today we all enter into phase two of shiva with them, the seven day Jewish process of literally sitting in intense mourning and reflection over Jesus’s death. But, for Mary she isn’t there yet. She is still in shock, numb from disbelief, and most of all stuck in her confusion of how this could have ever happened.

What to do now? Peter and the others could go fishing; they could start their businesses again. Perhaps they could have a reunion in a couple of years and talk about old times. About the only thing she could think of was perhaps starting a memorial society for a dead Galilean preacher. Sadness, disappointment, and emptiness had been her companions since Friday. It had been a good three-year run, but now it was over.

Let’s face it. We all have our days when we stand with our dreams in shambles around our feet. This happens to good people as well as to those who haven’t been so good. “Why me, Lord?” we say. I go to church consistently. I even go to Sunday School. My life was going so well and now this darkness.

What we must all learn, and it is a very difficult lesson, is that it is easy to believe, to have faith, in the sunlight but very difficult to believe in the darkness. It is easy to believe when life is good, but when it turns sour the natural inclination is to feel rejected or guilty. Anyone can

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walk in the sunshine; only the faithful can walk in the dark. In fact, if you have blood in your veins and skin on your bones, you will have some darkness. No one has all sunshine. It has been said that all sunshine produces is a desert, not a garden.

“Early in the morning, while it was still dark....” That’s where Easter really begins. It begins in darkness. It begins with fear, bewilderment, pain, and a profound loss of certainty. Easter is what happens when ordinary people brush up against an extraordinary God. Easter is what it looks like when broken, hungry humanity encounters a bizarre and inexplicable Love in the half-light of dawn. **Easter is where we find hope in the midst of struggle; light in the midst of darkness.**

When it was yet dark...God was at work in Mary’s behalf. He was making a way where there was no way. He was creating hope. And what God made was the resurrection happen in total darkness. Sometime in the predawn hours of that Sunday morning, a great mystery transpired in secret. No sunlight illuminated the event. No human being witnessed it. And even now, two thousand years later, no one can come close to explaining it in detail. It exceeds all of our attempts to pin it down, because it’s a mystery known only to God. Whatever the resurrection was and is, its fullness lies in holy darkness, shielded from our eyes. All we can know is that somehow, in an ancient tomb on a starry night, God worked in secret to bring life out of death. Somehow, from the heart of loss and misery, God enacted salvation.

Have no doubt about it though, when things get tough--and they will--it does not mean that God has abandoned you. When the darkness comes upon you, God is still working in your behalf. Mary didn't leave Jesus or deny him. She remained faithful to him while waiting in darkness for the light. She sees Jesus first because she chooses to remain in the darkness. Peter and the beloved disciple, John, leave when they see the empty tomb, but not Mary, Mary stays,

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feeling confused and robbed of a loved one no longer living. As Nadia Bolz Weber puts it, she “remains present to what is real, to what is actually happening.” She does so even when what is real feels unbearable.

I know that there is unbearable heartache on every pew and that most of us suffer in silence. I know because I had to come clean this week with myself, with Kendall, and most importantly with God that I still suffer in silence from the death of my father in the midst of other deaths and trials that cloud me. No one is immune to heartache. Rich or poor, we all carry our own baggage. I am finding however, that it is increasingly true that clarity, hope, and healing come when I am willing to sit and wait in hard and barren places, places where what is normal fall flat, and all easy answers prove inadequate. I’ve found that Jesus comes in the darkness, and sometimes it takes a long time to recognize him. He doesn’t look the way I expect him to look. He doesn’t let me cling to my old ideas. He disappears again just as I grab hold of him, always ascending. But when he comes, he calls my name, and in that instant, I recognize both myself and him.

So let's be real and sit in the darkness and discuss the elephant in the room. Death haunts us all. That is why we watch our weight, exercise, take our vitamins, and see our doctors with some regularity. We are running from death.

I like Leo Tolstoy's story about the ever present threat of death. I paraphrase:

A man was running from a bear, and to get away from it he jumped down a dry well, and he clings to a small tree growing between the bricks on the side, only to look down and see a lion at the bottom of the well waiting for him. And when he looked to the top of the well, he saw a bear trying to reach him. As he hangs there by the small tree, knowing he cannot stay there

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forever, he sees a rat crawling out on the limb he was hanging onto, and the rat begins to gnaw at the limb. The man sees this and knows that he will inevitably perish.

Death is a fact of life and we must face it. We can't in good conscience deny it as some would have us do. Easter and our Christian faith have no life apart from the resurrection. You may be in the darkness on this Easter morning; don't feel alone or abandoned. God has not abandoned you in the dark.

We need to realize that in our most difficult situations God is working in our behalf even if we do not know it at the time. He is working to bring light and to dispel our dark situations. The good news is not only that Jesus was raised from the tomb, but the character of God is revealed in Jesus. He is light and he is also love.

The angels used this as the perfect opportunity to proclaim the good news, but they were interrupted by Jesus himself. When Mary recognizes who he is, she calls him by the name she has used for him: Teacher, Rabboni.

In her darkness she is ministered to, and her life goes in a different direction when Jesus calls her to go and tell the disciples. Note that his first command as the resurrected Christ is to tell a woman to go preach to his disciples. She becomes an apostle to the disciples.

What was she to proclaim? She was to proclaim that Jesus was alive. He had been resurrected. Death was dead. Death had been defeated. The elephant in the room had been killed. No longer must we live in darkness. The light had come. God in Jesus had defeated sin and death.

Where we in the past had done everything to hide from death, she is told to proclaim the cure for death, the resurrection of Christ. We try to camouflage death, artificial grass at the cemetery, slumber rooms for the deceased to make it appear that they are not dead but merely

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sleeping. We put makeup on the corpse in preparing it for the viewing. But none of this hides the fact of death, nor the fear of death from us. We deny death with our language too. We do not die; we pass away. We do not die; we cross over. We do not die; we enter our eternal rest. We do not die; we are promoted to the church triumphant. And on it goes.

With Jesus, who by his resurrection has defeated death, we no longer have to avoid death, for with the resurrection of Jesus, Death is dead. This is the uniqueness to the faith we bear witness to as Christians.

Arnold Toynbee, the noted historian, in his Study of History VII noted some parallels between Jesus and other so-called saviors. Thirty-seven of those who claim to be the savior died after a trial, but that was all. No hint of resurrection. There is no hint even in Greek mythology of a resurrection. In short, the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth was a distinct event in history without parallel. Mohamed is dead, the Greek gods have vanished, the Roman gods are gone, statesmen, politicians, and philosophers have lost their control over our lives. Nothing could wake Mary and pierce her darkness, not grave clothes or the singing angels. ***But when Jesus calls her name, she responds.***

God is piercing her darkness and ours. He not only ministers to her with comforting angels, he calls her into usefulness. Go and tell the apostles what you have seen and what you have heard. The dispelling of our darkness demands that we tell others in order to complete the cure.

As believers, we have difficulty acknowledging that the same power that rolled away the stone that covered the mouth of the cave where Jesus was buried can roll away the stones that have plagued our lives. The power and light of the resurrection will dispel our darkness and enable us to live out resurrected, empowered lives.

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This Easter, may the Christ who rose in the darkness lead us into new life, new light, and new hope. May we know him in the half-lit places, the shadowy places, the hard places. May we dare to linger at the tomb until he calls our names and sends us forth to share his good news with the world that Christ the Lord is risen today. Halleluiah!

Let us pray:

Risen Lord, help us remember that it's in the darkness that the dawn of morning light comes. It's in the darkness that we discover You have already rolled away the stone and Your love has been let loose in the world. We know it's not very hard at all to see the darkness in the world. That the darkness is ever-present and is all too real for those who sit in these pews. Help us then to retell Your story again and again so that Your light may shine in the dark places of the world. Help us remember that resurrection has the power to transform a graveyard into a garden brimming with new life. It has the power to break open tombs and tear down walls. It has the power to transform the rocky wildernesses of our hearts into instruments of grace. And it has the power to show death for what it is: “the possibility for love to come again.” Please help us to not lose that hope. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.

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Prayers of the People

In peace, let us pray.

Have mercy, O God. For the peace of the world, that a spirit of respect and compassion may grow among all peoples, in the world and in your church, we pray to you, most Gracious God. Have mercy, O God. For those in positions of public trust, that they may serve in ways that enhance the common good, promoting justice, dignity and freedom for all, we pray to you O God. Have mercy, O God. For a blessing upon the labors of all, and for wisdom in caring for your creation, we pray to you, most loving God. Have mercy, O God. For all who suffer and are in pain, for all who grieve, for those who are imprisoned, oppressed, or enslaved, that they may be released and freed from distress, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For this community, that we may be awake to your word and responsive to your call, that in all we do your glory may shine, we pray to you O Christ. Christ have mercy. For those with whom we disagree, and those we do not understand. Give us the grace and humility to practice kindness and gentleness, we pray to you, O Christ. Christ have mercy. For ourselves, for the forgiveness of our sin and hardness of heart, for the strength and courage to follow Jesus more closely, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Free us from anxiety; fill us anew with joy, peace and patience; give us health of mind, body and spirit; empower us to serve you and our neighbors in all we do, we pray to you. Holy Spirit, come to us. Holy One, come to us. Transform us into your image from one degree of glory to the next, and sustain us until that day we are united with you and all the saints, rejoicing with endless joy. May it be so, O Trinity of Love. Alleluia! Amen.¹

Offertory Prayer

Mighty God of Resurrection Power: You offer us life that overcomes death, light that overcomes darkness, hope that overcomes our deepest despair! What could we possibly offer in return? Our tithes and gifts, yes; but our minds, hearts, and bodies, as well. May our minds be about understanding who you are and who you long for us to be in this world. May our hearts overflow with your love and compassion for the poor, the oppressed, and the forgotten. May our bodies carry us out of the tombs of isolation to engage our neighbors as sisters and brothers. May the “Alleluias!” we offer leave this place with us to bring hope to everyone we meet! In the Risen Christ, we pray. Amen.

¹ <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/liturgical-resources-for-2019-general-conference>