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Easter 2020  
April 12, 2020

***While It Was Still Dark***  
***John 20:1-18***

*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. <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.*

*<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look<sup>[a]</sup> into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,<sup>[b]</sup> “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> 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.’” <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.*

Do you ever think about how the Easter story *begins* in the *dark*?  
 Did you hear what John's Gospel says about the resurrection?  
 Mary comes to the tomb, *while it was still dark*.

That speaks to me this year, what about you?  
 Seems like in the midst of this global pandemic,  
 When the coronavirus is spreading across our country,  
 And people are dying from this disease,  
 Life can be rather dark, right?

I was talking to Mark's daughter, Rev. Leah Hrachovec at First Pres Stillwater,  
 and she said that her 8 year old daughter was talking about how crazy these days  
 are, and she said: *I just feel like scrambled eggs inside!*  
 Oh—I love that!  
 Do you feel like scrambled eggs inside?  
 I know I do!

Leah had also seen a great quote:  
 This is the *Lentiest Lent*, and the *Holiest Holy Week!*  
 Isn't that the truth?  
 It's been quite a week!

Which is why it's so fitting that *Easter begins---while it was still dark*.  
 That's a very powerful statement today.  
 Because we are all in a state of collective GRIEF.  
 We are grieving, if we're honest.

Last week, I was listening to a podcast with sociologist Brene Brown,  
 and grief researcher David Kessler, called '*Finding Meaning in Grief*'.  
 And they were talking about how we are *ALL grieving* during this pandemic.  
 No matter who we are, or how old we are...  
 Unlocking Ourselves Podcast with Brene Brown, March 31, 2020.

We are *grieving the loss of the world we once knew*.  
 Of a time when we didn't have to stay 6 feet apart, alone in our own homes,  
 away from our offices, separated from loved ones, especially on holidays.

We are grieving the loss of separation between home and work and school, '  
 when kids went to class, and parents went to work, and home was just, well, home.

We are grieving the loss of our financial resources,  
And the loss of a news cycle without stats about illness and death.

We all know this is not going to last forever,  
but it ***IS really affecting us*** right now.  
Think about how it's affecting you for a minute....

And the best thing we can do is--  
***We can feel what we feel.***  
We can ***grieve*** our very real losses.  
And that's O.K.

The problem is, ***we usually don't give ourselves PERMISSION to grieve.***  
We lose someone, and after a few days people are 'glad to have us back'.  
we ask one another how are you,  
And we expect to hear 'I'm fine'—even a week after the loss of a loved one.  
But who is 'fine' a week, or even months, after losing someone dear?

***Grief happens to everyone***, whether we want it or not.  
***And as Brene says, what you don't feel, you can't heal!***  
What we need to do is '***normalize***' the grief we are all experiencing right now.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her groundbreaking work on death and dying,  
tried to do just that, by describing ***5 stages*** of death and dying,  
stages that are also used to describe the grief process—  
***denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.***

David Kessler, in collaboration with Kubler-Ross,  
added a sixth stage: ***meaning.***

Now anyone who has ever lost someone,  
or grieved any kind of loss knows that these are ***NOT linear stages---***  
you don't simply go through denial, then anger, then bargaining, depression,  
acceptance, and finally find some great meaning.  
They are more like ***circles, or a dance of feelings*** that come and go as you grieve.  
And we sure can't just slap some 'meaning' on our losses!  
Some things are just—horrible losses!

But the truth is, ***we are feeling grief, and circling*** through these stages.  
In other words....we are feeling this.....While it is still dark.

But, that's *exactly when Easter began*.  
 That's when Mary discovered that the tomb was empty.  
 Which is so relevant,  
 For this Easter, in the midst of a *pandemic*.

*Light and dark* are prominent themes in John's Gospel.  
 He reminds us over and again that Christ's light shines into the darkness,  
 and the darkness cannot overcome it.

We all know what it's like to be in the dark, *literally, and emotionally*.  
 Some moments in life are very dark.  
 Some are *surreal*....  
 You can't believe you are really living it.  
 This is one of those times, right?

It's kind of like when you have to walk into a *funeral home*  
 to prepare your loved one's service,  
 or you watch their body lowered into the ground at the *cemetery*.  
 It's kind of like when you hear a dreaded *diagnosis*,  
 or the words I *don't love* you anymore,  
 Or when you get a middle of the night frantic *phone call*,  
 An awful *message or email*,  
 or the command to report to your *boss's office*.

Sometimes life is so dark that all you can do is just *keep on breathing*,  
 and put one *foot* in front of another,  
 and then wake up the next day.....and do it all over again.  
 We've all *been there*, in the dark!

*And then we hear this story...that Mary comes to Jesus' tomb in the dark*.  
 She, and all the disciples, have just seen their dearest friend and Lord Jesus  
 suffer, and die on the cross.  
 They know that he was laid in a tomb.  
 And now they fear his body is missing! Imagine THAT grief!

Surprisingly, in the Gospel of John, *Mary is alone*.  
 Which is precisely *how WE feel* when walking through the valleys of life!  
 Whether it's true or not, we FEEL alone!  
 Two other disciples, Peter and John,  
 come running to the empty tomb,

and then run back home, and we're not quite sure what they believe,  
but they *leave Mary all alone!*

When she looks back into the tomb again, she wants *answers*.

*Just like WE do* when life is dark.

We ask ourselves, and God—*why?* why has this happened?

The angels ask her, *Woman why are you weeping?*

But she demands answers—*they have taken away my Lord,  
and I don't know where they have laid him!*

Mary turns and sees Jesus standing there, but she *doesn't recognize* him.  
Not at first.

Isn't that just *like US* in our dark times?

We believe that Jesus is always with us, just as he promised,  
and yet so often we fail to recognize his presence,  
or his voice, right beside us.

But when Jesus calls Mary *by name*, she knows him.

She knows it is her Lord.

And she replies with a term of endearment, *Rabbouni*, Teacher.

This is when the light breaks through the darkness.

He is not gone. He is alive. He is going to the Father.

And she finally sees His *light shining* into her darkness,  
and she receives the good news she is about to share, *I have seen the Lord*.

Today--We SHOULD be *surrounded by joyful* colors, sights, sounds and smells.

With candy, and gifts, food, friends, and new outfits.

Instead, we are separated from one another, watching worship from our homes.

Each coming to this Easter morning, *in some form of darkness*.

I once saw a sign that read:

*Remember everyone is fighting a battle you know nothing about.*

Which is exactly right.

You have a battle. I have a battle.

Many times we do *not even know* one another's battles.

But, we're all walking through darkness, and we all need God's light!

Well, today—not only do we have individual battles,  
 We have the one we are all facing together.  
 And added up---it brings grief.  
 And we **NEED---we really need---**  
 some **good news**—the kind of good news that brings light into the dark!

I mean, when we come to Easter morning,  
**Don't we come to find Jesus, the light** shining in our darkness?

And here we learn that he is resurrected, **while it was dark**.  
 in the **midst** of sorrow and weeping and worry!  
**What does that mean to you?**  
 That Jesus' resurrection happened that way?

Jesus was **NOT raised** from death with **trumpets** and a supernatural sunrise.  
 He was resurrected during the night.  
 And those who loved him most came looking for him, in the dark.

**Why?**  
 What if the light of Christ means so much more-- **in the darkness?**

**Writer Anne Lamott** tells about taking a good friend on a trip.  
 Even though this friend was near death. The trip was the week after Easter.  
 Anne wrote, "She ought to have one more Easter. Easter is so profound."  
 So the two friends **recreated Holy Week**, a week later.  
 On Thursday they had communion, using Coca Cola for wine and Pepperidge  
 Farm Goldfish for the bread broken in remembrance of him.  
 They washed each other's feet.  
 They celebrated Good Friday.  
 And they remembered Easter morning.

She writes, "**I hate it that you can't prove the beliefs** of my faith.  
 If I were God, I'd have the answers at the end of the workbook,  
 so you could check as you went along, ....  
 But noooo—**Darkness** is our context, Easter's context;  
 without it you couldn't see the light. Hope is not about proving anything.  
 It's about choosing to believe this one thing,  
 that **love is bigger** than any grim, bleak stuff anyone can throw at us". Anne Lamott,  
 Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2005), p. 274

We really *can't prove* this faith in resurrection.  
 We can't prove beyond a doubt that Jesus was raised from death  
 after he died on the cross.  
 We can't prove eternal life.

But we sure can *believe* it.  
 We can *experience* it.  
 We can see the *evidence* of it all around us.  
 We know it's real--  
 Just like we believe in *love*, even when we don't feel it.  
 Or, in the *sun* even when it's not shining.

A woman from my seminary, Pastor Pam Driesell preached once that  
 You don't prove *love*; you embrace it.  
 You don't prove *power*; you experience it.  
 You don't prove *LIFE*; YOU LIVE IT!  
 You don't prove *NEW LIFE*; you RECEIVE IT!  
 Pam Driesell, "Beyond Bunnies and Jelly Beans", April 24 2011, [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org).

Leslie Newbigin writes:  
*'Resurrection is no longer a mere doctrine, it has a living face, and a name'*  
 Leslie Newbigin, *The Light Has Come*, Eerdmans, pg. 142.

It is in the darkness that we get to *receive, and experience* the light of God,  
 the presence of Jesus beside us.  
 Easter is about finding that light in the dark.  
***That HOPE--***  
***right in the midst of all that is sad, and sorrowful.***

***Because the hope we have---is found on a CROSS!***  
 Our hope is in a Savior Jesus, who died, and defeated death on a cross.  
 He was resurrected, so we might have hope, and new, everlasting life.

Sometimes it's hard to believe in that hope.  
 But it's *why we celebrate Easter*.

Tom Harrison of Asbury United Methodist tells a story in his devotional,  
 called *Perceptions*:  
 A *professor* at a seminary received the tragic news that his only son had been  
 killed in a car accident. The professor left the classroom,

and drove to the city where his son had lived.  
 Four weeks went by and no one on campus heard from the professor.  
 They feared he'd completely fallen apart.

Then one morning, when the students were in chapel,  
 he slipped in the back door of the service.  
 When the service was over, he went to the front and said,  
*"I'm here to tell you that I've been to the bottom...the very bottom."*  
 He was quiet and his head lowered.  
 Then he looked up and said,  
*"But I'm also here to tell you that the bottom is solid...very, very solid."*  
 No matter how deeply you might go into darkness....  
*grace is always underneath you....and it is very, very solid."* Tom Harrison, "The  
 Bottom is Solid", Perceptions: Observations on Everyday Life, 1998, pg. 7

We come today, just like they came to the empty tomb,  
 looking for that ***solid foundation*** of God's grace.  
 The very real hope that He is alive, which means we can live too, no matter what.  
 We come for the news of resurrection, after death,  
 And new life, after what seemed to be the end!

This hope takes on new depth, when we live it ***for one another***.  
 Ever heard of a ***banquet parable of hell and heaven?***  
 In ***hell*** people sit at the big banquet table,  
 miserable because they have no elbows that bend.  
 They cannot feed themselves.  
 But in ***heaven***, at the great banquet,  
 People are filled with joy—because they are reaching across the table,  
 Feeding one another.

David Kessler tells a similar parable called ***"Long Spoons" in that podcast***.  
 In ***hell*** the people don't know what to do with them,  
 They are trying to feed themselves,  
 and can't get the food to their mouths.  
 But in ***heaven***, the long spoons are a gift—because people are feeding one another.

During this time, when we all need to help one another.  
 We need to ***BE the light*** for one another.  
 We need to be like Mary and ***share the Good News*** of resurrection and new life!



I think of this when I hear the story of people buying groceries for neighbors,  
making face masks, giving them away.  
I think of this when I hear of families waving through the windows of their loved  
ones in nursing homes.

We ***CAN BE the light*** for one another.  
We ***SHOULD*** be the light for one another.  
And we ***shouldn't judge*** how others are dealing with this pandemic or grief.  
We all have to name and feel our own sorrow,  
and accept how others handle it.

And we have to ***take CARE of ourselves first***.  
We have to receive the Good News of light and new life, in our own hearts,  
so we can share that with those around us.

My spiritual director sent some ***tips for taking care of ourselves***—  
Like get up each day, take a shower, move your body,  
try to get some sunlight, or time outdoors.  
We need some time to complain and grieve,  
but we also need to count our blessings.  
We need to think about what's dark,  
and then give thanks to God for the light that is shining.  
We all have blessings.  
***I wonder, are we looking at those too?***

Finding gratitude leads us to the next step—  
***which is to REACH OUT***.  
We can reach out—in so many different ways.  
***I wonder, have you thought about how you might reach out?***  
We have people sending email cards, or art to one another,  
Making and sending masks,  
We have people making phone calls or dropping essential items on porches.

***I'm not saying it's easy***.  
It's easier right now to ***give up***.  
To stay in bed and pull the covers over your head.  
To retreat or let everything go.

***But we—we have Easter.***

We are ***Easter people.***

And the light of Christ does break into our darkness.

That is the ***Good News of the Gospel*** this morning:

The light of Jesus Christ is shining in our darkness,  
and the darkness cannot overcome it!

He is risen, He is alive,

***he is our LIGHT, and our NEW LIFE!***

And for that, all God's people say, Amen.