

Location, Location, Location

Easter Sunday
April 16, 2017
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Text: John 20

I am going to start this Easter sermon with a corny joke. It's a joke that I'm sure many of you have heard before – it's a joke that I know I have told before: One night a police officer comes across a gentleman down on his hands and knees under a street light – “looking for my keys” the man says. And so, wanting to be helpful, the officer plops down on his hands and knees and joins him, searching the area thoroughly. After several minutes, the officer looks up and sighs – “I really think we've covered every square inch and I can't imagine that we missed it – are you sure you lost the keys here?” The gentleman answers “Oh, no - I dropped my keys over there in that alley, but there's no light over there, so I decided to look here! A corny joke – but for the purposes of this sermon, I think it is also a parable, as I hope you'll come to see.

The Gospel of John chapter 20 tells the story of the morning on which the resurrection of Jesus is revealed – the story of Jesus alive after he has been crucified on a cross and placed, dead, in a tomb. Let's have a little review and quiz about this John 20 story – this quiz is for everyone, whether you're more or less familiar with the story. First question: **who?**...who does John say first came to the tomb on that first day of the week?... Mary Magdalene – one of Jesus' faithful followers throughout his ministry; there has been much misinformation and misunderstanding about Mary Magdalene, but she was part of the core group of the faithful who followed and supported Jesus. One of the important things scholars have noted, particularly in more contemporary feminist theology, is the significance of a woman being the first to come upon and report that something is happening – that could be a whole sermon, but that's not the main point of this quiz for right now.

Second question: **when?**...when did Mary come to the tomb?... John says it was early, in fact that “it was still dark”. The tradition of Easter sunrise worship services, and even of

nighttime Easter vigils, is rooted in this narrative of the resurrection story unfolding in the darkness of night dawning into day. And this setting of the story in the dark gets more toward what I want to explore...but I need to ask one more question: **why?**...why did Mary come to the tomb?... (trick question!) John doesn't really say! - Now - when you read the various Gospel accounts, you'll see that several of the women who followed Jesus were planning to anoint the body of Jesus with oil and spices, a custom of care and honor, and John may be connecting to that storyline. But beyond any task Mary may have had in mind, I think that asking **why?** connects us more importantly to the relationship and loss that motivated her that day. The **why?** of Mary being there is because Jesus has died – the why is that she is grieving – the why is because Mary with the other disciples was one who loved and followed Jesus, ate and drank and celebrated and suffered and hoped with, and lost, Jesus. Mary is there because of her grief.

I want to stay a while with that, to have that settle in, because that is particularly important to consider on a celebrative Easter day. Because I think there could be just a little inkling in us of a storyline here that maybe the **why?** of Mary going to the tomb was in order to look for the Risen Lord – after all, Jesus had spoken foreshadowings of his rising from the dead – so maybe Mary was wondering...? NO! - Mary went there because of her grief. Which makes us see that in this story is the description “**while it was still dark**” describes not just the time of day, but also the emotional/spiritual reality for Mary – it was dark for her. And here's the thing that I have noticed about this story for the first time this Easter, which is that Peter and John and the other disciples did NOT go to the tomb early...now I don't doubt their grief and loss, but I do see Mary doing something different in the midst of her darkness. I see Mary going to the tomb to grieve her dead teacher, I see her entering into the darkness. And I also see that BECAUSE Mary went there, because she was present in the darkness of the day and of her soul, that she saw - that it was revealed to her - the first inklings of something different happening in that place on that day. The way Mary first became a part of the story of resurrection was by going to the tomb “while it was still dark.”

When we listen to the who and the when and the why of Mary in this story, what I think happens is that Mary turns to us and asks us a question this day about **where?** – a question of where am I, are you, are we, looking for resurrection? Because certainly for us it's different than for Mary – we can't pretend we don't know the story – it's not a surprise ending for us. Our location is on the resurrection side of the story, and the resurrection is the lens through which we see Jesus and ourselves and our world. But what does that mean for us as followers of the Risen Christ? I come to realize that I have often been told, and learned, and I'm sure I have preached, to look for the resurrection in the light! And why not? – there's lots of good things to see in resurrection light: there is triumph and power and hope. But such resurrection light in the hands of the church can be turned into triumphalism, and power over, and hope only for some. I wonder if it is not in the light, but still in the darkness that we are meant to be looking for, that we will find most deeply, the resurrection story. What I have come to see in some new ways in this season of Lent just passed, by delving into lament, into many places of darkness, of loss, of judgment and pain – I've come to see that as people of faith we are called into such places of darkness; what I have come to see in some new ways in broad strokes personally and nationally, in congregation and denomination, in ministry and in life, is that people of faith are called to name, to acknowledge, to listen to, to enter into, darkness.

Because what I have realized about Mary on that morning, is that what she did, the when and why of what she did, was not an act of despair, but of faith and faithfulness. I've been thinking how this story shows how peculiar it can be that we use labels of being a "Christian", or not, or another religion. Because what would be our label for Mary that morning? – Jewish? pre-Christian? Christian? – it seems strange to even care, doesn't it? – which points out that what's important is not the label for Mary but that she was faithful – on a human level she was faithful to love and grief, to devotion and loss; and she was faithful with God too, that day, I think – I imagine that morning she was praying, she was seeking God's presence in her confusion and grief. And it is in such faith and faithfulness –

faithfulness in the midst of darkness - that the God of life, of resurrection, is present, is revealed. Can we learn such faith from Mary this Easter day? – where might we be called to be present, to be looking, to be faithful, and see what God will reveal to us?

I know it's easier to be in the light – and thank God for it, for the joy and celebration and blessing and beauty of life, of our lives, of this day, of resurrection – thanks be to God. Amen! But it's this odd way we have of using the light that is the problem: use it to try to deny the darkness – to stay out of away from what is difficult – to gloss over what is broken; and that's not resurrection light at all, that's just a fragile veneer, as shallow as it is shiny.

The call I hear for me this resurrection day, for us as resurrection people for the church as the community of the Risen Christ – the call I hear from Mary - is to have the faith and faithfulness to go to those places where it is still dark, and see what God will reveal to us there.

- What is there in me that is broken, that is hurting? that is destructive and dead? that is lost and hopeless? I ask God for the faith, the courage, to go there – to believe the God of life will meet me there. Where is the darkness in you? – how will the God of life meet you there?
- Where in our life as a congregation are there things to grieve? to acknowledge our needs for restoration and life? Thank God for all the light and life here – but faith gives us the courage to see also where there is still darkness that we are a part of and which we perpetuate. Such faith believes that the God of life will be revealed to us not only in our strength, but also in our humility and weakness.
- And more than about me and you and us together, on this Easter Day in our world there are simply far too many places where and far too many people for whom, it is still dark – where there is violence and need, where there is prejudice and injustice, intolerance and greed, death and diminishment. These are people and places who may share in or care about this Easter celebration we have today or not – but regardless of that, we are called to grieve their brokenness as much as Mary grieved her crucified Lord – for this is the Lord

of life for all God's children, and in Christ's death the suffering of this world was named dear to God's heart. We are called in faith and faithfulness to go to such peoples and places while it is, because it is, still dark.

What will we find there? – I believe we will find the Lord of life is present. Now, please hear me, this is no quick dash in to darkness to proclaim: “we have the light” – and then dash away... – this is the faith and faithfulness to go where our relationships, our grief, our love, our care calls us – to remain there a while - and when we do, we will find that the God of life is present in and at work in our world. As we go there, perhaps it will be to lament – perhaps to show compassion – perhaps it will be to confess – perhaps to confront – perhaps to listen – perhaps to speak – perhaps it will be to work – perhaps to give – perhaps to receive – perhaps it will be to learn or to teach or to unlearn – perhaps to bless – perhaps it will be to be present – perhaps it will be to not know the answer, but to care...and in all those things we will be opening ourselves and others and this world to the presence of the One who embraced death and who now speaks, embodies, is, Life, the Risen Lord.

That's what I have to say this Easter Day, because that's what I believe this Easter story says. Where it is still dark – our faith in and faithfulness to God call us there – and there, a different story is told, a story which in God's life-giving power will be revealed – the truth that: goodness is stronger than evil; love is stronger than hate; light is stronger than darkness; life is stronger than death, through the Risen Christ who loves us, and all God's children and God's good earth. Thanks be to God. Alleluia! Amen.