



Minister
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March 27, 2005
Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Brand New Day

Intro: Our New Testament reading this morning is truly “Gospel”, or Good News. It is the story of Mary and two disciples, the first witnesses of the empty tomb in the early hours of Easter morning.

Not long ago something spectacular took place, it was almost out of this world, and it had everyone talking. A few months ago on November 7, 2004 - does anyone remember what happened? (The northern lights appeared across the upper Midwest.)

The Northern Lights are a miracle that regularly takes place. After the sun sets and night arrives, seemingly out of nowhere, these streaks of rainbow colored light suddenly begin to appear in the heavens. They cut across the sky changing, twisting, almost dancing in the empty places between the stars. They are life and light, they seem defiant of the darkness and dormancy around them. The glittering, colorful, surprising beauty of these fleeting colors swirling across a

black backdrop of sky is absolutely breathtaking.

Many who have seen the Aurora Borealis say the only response is to stand awestruck and simply behold what is before them. Today, scientists can offer an explanation for this phenomenon; they can start describing the streams of charged particles that meet with the magnetic field of the earth that causes certain colors and so forth. But that’s boring, and any explanation, does not add to the experience of WOW, and wonder at simply seeing the northern lights. The WOW and wonder of Easter can be overshadowed by attempts to explain it as well.

Easter begins in the dark. From the

Thursday night when Jesus cries in the Garden alone, to Good Friday when the clouds cover the sun as he dies on the cross, to the confusion that follows his execution, there has been darkness. Everything about Jesus’ death has reflected the darkness of great sorrow. Jesus is laid in a tomb, with a stone rolled over the opening to keep out any intruders, but it also keeps out any possibility of light as well. It seems that his body was set in eternal grave-like darkness.

As John tells it, Easter begins with Mary Magdalene leaving Jerusalem in the darkness making her way, as we might imagine it, stumbling over the rocks in the pathway, out of the city to the place where the tomb was. The sun was not up, that was hours away. She did not go to anoint the body, she went to cry. She went to continue her time of grief. Her tears had not stopped. Mary and all those who followed Jesus were having a dark night of the soul. Their dreams had ended with Jesus’ death. They were faced with the loss of their hopes and expectations for the future. Suddenly all they had hoped for, all that they had planned on, was gone in an instant.

As she arrives at the tomb she discovers that it is empty. She sees that the stone has been moved and makes the assumption the grave has been robbed. She hurries back into the city to awaken the disciples and tell them this terrible news. Two of them, Simon Peter and one other, hurry out to the tomb to

investigate for themselves and she follows behind them. They look around, leave, and go back to the city. Mary remains alone at the tomb, continuing her grief. She stays to cry some more.

Then a question comes to Mary. Twice someone asks why are you weeping? First, the angels and then the risen Lord, ask why she is weeping. It is a question that seems to have a very obvious answer. Here is a woman whose life has been put back together. Here is a person whose life was falling apart and Jesus made her whole again. Here is a person who was once on the farthest fringe of society who was welcomed and loved by Jesus. Life had been good and getting better, then she witnessed his brutal execution and his burial. Now in the darkness, it seems that his grave has been robbed. What else could she do but weep? This moment in the darkness, as Jesus is standing before her, her eyes have filled with tears, she is so consumed with grief that she cannot see. What else could she do but sit beside the open tomb and cry and wonder what next in this tragic sequence of events, what could possibly happen next?

What happens next is that Mary hears her name called and the voice is familiar. Everything changes with two words. He speaks her name “Mary” And she replies “Rabouni”. Mary never expected to hear that voice again. She thought she had lost her teacher and close friend. She had come to the tomb to mourn, to mark

the end of the relationship. But the risen Jesus calls her by name reopening the relationship, renewing the friendship. Her eyes begin to be opened to what resurrection means.

The light of understanding shines at this moment and Mary sees the miracle clearly. It is then that she realizes that it was not all in vain, that she is now in the presence of her Lord once again and she reaches out and embraces him. He is real, it is true! What he said has come to pass! While she has her arms around him, Jesus says, do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended. Yes he lives, but things are not like they were before. This is a brand new day. Mary's heart does somersaults, IT SOARS. He Lives! And she goes to tell the others what she has seen. She shares the Good News. She is the first one to say. He is Risen! Everything changes as Mary meets Jesus outside the tomb.

Often the story seems too incredible to believe. At first Mary could not believe it, the disciples could not believe it, we can't believe it sometimes. Sometimes in our best efforts to find Him, we are eluded again and again. Fear, daring not to hope, leave us shrouded in the darkness, unable to see the light. But see where the shift happened for Mary. It was when Jesus spoke her name. She had been seeking the body of a dead Jesus and she encountered the risen Christ. Her meager expectations were met with

overwhelming reality. Jesus spoke her name and she recognized him!

In her brokenness and need, through her tears she was able to see the risen Jesus and hear him calling her name. The risen Christ speaks our names as well. Right now, we may not see with the clarity of Mary, but our name is spoken and through our tears we will find him.

On this Easter morning, we are here searching for our risen Lord. Where will we find him? Here, in the church? One hopes! But more likely we will find the Life-Giver in the world, through those doors, onto the streets, wherever there is human need, where love is lacking and justice absent, where violence and hatred hold sway, where children suffer and poverty reigns, wherever darkness and death have staked a claim—there we will find the Jesus of Easter.

The Gospel account of resurrection is not a finished story. It continues to happen in your life and in mine, and in communities of faith like Community Presbyterian. Easter happens every Sunday. We need not wait until next year to proclaim what we know from Mary's testimony and from our own experience, that Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Easter life is what happens to us when we get over our fear of death. The joy of Easter releases us from the pressure to

fend off death and marks the beginning of new life, the joy that has no end. That life is to be found, where Mary found it, at the foot of the cross, in an empty tomb.

What God does for us through the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus is to climb into our death with us and take away its sting, snatching from the grave its temporary victory. In Jesus, God looks death in the eye and declares it will not have the last word with us. God has a different plan for us and we don't have to wait until we die to experience it: God's plan is life in an utterly new way.

No wonder Mary had trouble recognizing it when she saw it. No wonder it's such a challenge for us to perceive it and be transformed in the midst of all the other voices calling to us. Easter is an invitation to start looking for life, to make some changes, to let go of our deeply held fear of death and our insecurities that drive us to spend ourselves on things that do not matter, while ignoring those that matter greatly. But we cannot do it alone. That's why Mary at the empty tomb on that first Easter morning runs to tell the others, that he is risen, that death itself has been defeated. This is good news that must be shared. It's why the church was born, to form communities of people who join together to look for life as God intended it to be lived. Life that is full and just and loving. That's what Jesus said to

her, that is what we have to say to each other. Christ is Risen. God's miraculous radiant light shines in the darkness. It is a brand new day. Amen.