

John 20:1-18
31 March 2013

SGL
CCNS

Out of the Darkness...

Bible Study:

Richard, my friend's little grandson came home from Sunday School and I asked him what they had studied.

His reply was, 'Nothing.' So I asked him, 'Didn't you study Jesus?' Richard's reply was, 'No, he wasn't even there.'

The cross is empty. The tomb is empty. Jesus is gone!

Some accounts tell us that before darkness fell on that Friday, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus prepared Jesus' body for burial. His wrapped body was placed in the tomb and the men rolled a huge stone across the entrance. Though the disciples scattered and hid for fear during those days, some gospels say the women kept a vigil.

On the third day, in the darkness of early morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone. Many stories exist about Mary – most of them not found in the Bible. What we do know is that Mary loved Jesus deeply – may have been one of his dearest friends. Those closest to Jesus were in pain. Mary was in agony.

All of us who have lost loved ones know the searing pain of grief. It is all-consuming. And so it was for Mary Magdalene as she went to mourn at the place where Jesus lay. John does not tell us how quickly she noticed the tomb was empty – but her shock was great enough that she ran to tell the two disciples. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

In what must have started out as a panicked sprint, Simon Peter and the other disciple raced each other to the tomb. In an almost clinical fashion they took note of the empty wrappings and just as empty tomb. No words are said. The two simply return home.

But Mary, who had caught up to them, mourned even more deeply now. Two angels ask her, “Why are you weeping?” and again she answers: “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Such is her sadness that the odd appearance of these two does not turn her away from her grief.

Then another voice, one which she should have recognized, asked: “Woman, why are you weeping?” John tells us that she mistakes the man for the gardener. But we find out the truth: it is Jesus, not so much in the flesh, but the resurrected Christ, who appears first to Mary. Finally she turns and learns the truth. It is this truth, - death has not had the last word - that Mary carries to the other disciples. And the rest is history.

All during Lent we have had reminders that it is a season to turn or return to God. Lent is a season to hold up our way of living in the light of what Jesus taught, and how he lived, and died. All these years later share the same foibles that caused even Jesus' closest confidants to fail him. In those last days, under cover of darkness, Judas betrayed, Peter denied, and so many other hid their identities. They were lost in more ways than one.

How many times have we felt lost, running around in all the wrong directions? When have we sat in the darkness – whether it was illness or despair or depression or loss? If you know those feelings then you, too, are like those in the aftermath of the crucifixion. It was a dark place, and hope seemed very, very far away.

What we miss, though, is that while the world was in darkness, God was at work. Many congregations keep the Easter vigil – through the darkness of Saturday – to rise before first light and practice the first ritual of the Easter vigil: the lighting of the new fire. With it, they say a prayer: “Bless this new fire, and increase in us a desire to shine forth with the brightness of Christ’s rising, until we feast at the banquet of eternal light.”

The flame from the fire is then passed to the Christ candle, which is then brought inside the worship space. Ancient stories from the Hebrew scriptures – some churches read 12 of them! – “speak of a God who acts in the world’s nighttime. Under cover of darkness, slaves cross rivers into freedom; dry bones rise up to live; the fiery furnace of the tyrant Nebuchadnezzar goes dark; and long before any human eyes have opened, a blue-green world is given light and a sheltering dome of air, while the land, sea and sky are filled with fruitful creatures of every shape and kind. From the beginning, God has called new life out of darkness, often against great odds.” (Benjamin M. Stewart, dean of the chapel at Lutheran School of Theology, Chicago. *The Christian Century*, March 20, 2013)

From this perspective we see John’s telling of that first Easter dawn as filled with people literally running around trying to figure out “what God has done in the night. God raises the dead before the world is fully awake to what is happening.” Like them, we are caught off guard, even though we have probably heard this story before.

Again and again Jesus appears to the disciples. And again and again they are caught off guard. They are not looking for Jesus. They think he is gone. Each time, in his own way, Jesus asks them to look at him, to turn to him. Their eyes are amazed. Their hearts burn within them. They recognize him in the breaking of the bread.

Come out of the darkness and into the light. Jesus is not gone. You just need to know where to look for him. In the breaking of the bread, in the sharing of the cup, on this Easter Day, God is once again calling new life out of darkness, even against the greatest of odds.