

Resurrection Light

John 20:1-18

There is a lot of movement, isn't there -- a lot of to-ing and fro-ing -- in John's story of the first Easter morning.

As the narrative begins in the pre-dawn darkness, Mary heads alone to the tomb to care for Jesus' dead body with the substances and the rituals of Judaism's burial practices. An unexpected and unwelcome sight greets her -- the stone which had sealed the tomb has been taken away. She can think of only one reason for this to have been done -- so that someone could remove the body; and she runs from the garden to find Simon Peter and the other -- unnamed, but beloved -- disciple. When Mary shares her news, the two men rush to the tomb, which they, too, find open. They go into the tomb and see that it is empty. They come back out of the tomb. They leave the garden and return to their homes.

As one commentator puts it: "In John's Easter account, people spend the day running around trying to come to terms with what God has done in the night."¹

The two male disciples seem to think they can best accomplish that coming to terms from a distance. They go home and we are told nothing more about what they do or think or feel or say on that morning.

But Mary stays. The tomb is empty and she cannot offer the last loving anointing which she has come to perform on the body of her executed friend and teacher. Still, she stays. She cannot bear to leave this place that holds what she believes to be her last connection to Jesus, the extraordinary man she has loved so much and now grieves so deeply. In his book *Resurrection* Alister McGrath writes: "For Mary, the body of Christ was the key to continuity with the past and her relationship with him. It was the bridge to events that mattered profoundly to her. [The body's] absence robbed her of that vital connection."²

On an early Sunday morning, Mary stands weeping in a garden, deep in grief for the dear friend whose life was lost on the cross and whose body has now been lost from the tomb. Through the prism of her tears, she sees a man she thinks must be the gardener.

Then he calls her by name, the light shifts, she sees from a new angle and knows the man to be her risen Lord.

During the Offertory, you will receive a crystal prism. I hope you will take it home and hang it in a spot where the light will catch it from one angle and then from another, so that the reflected and refracted light of the prism might be for you a symbol of that moment in the garden when Mary sees rightly in the shining light of the first Easter morning.

And I hope these prisms will be for us as well a symbol of our trust that resurrection is not a singular temporal event that happened long ago, but instead resurrection is the presence and the power that God brings again and again -- and again -- into places of darkness and despair. Resurrection is the

¹ Benjamin M. Steward; "Living By the Word"; *Christian Century*; March 20, 2013

² Alister McGrath; *Resurrection*; p. 8

unquenchable light of life, known to us supremely through Jesus Christ, whose Incarnation, life, ministry, and rising are all the gift of God to humanity and creation.

“Light” is a theme throughout John’s Gospel. In his lyrical Prologue, John says of Christ’s Incarnation that “The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.” (1:9) Later, Jesus declares to his disciples: “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (8:12)

Light comes into the world in and through Jesus. In the world the Light meets resistance and rejection. But it does not retreat. Like these prisms that shine and refract and glow differently as illumination hits them from different angles, so God’s love shines into the places where it is needed -- now as compassion, now as liberation, now as peacemaking, now as inspiration to service. The light of God’s love is beautiful from every angle, even as it sometimes surprises us with a new facet, an unexpected ray, a startling gleam.

Certainly, Mary does not expect the world to be bathed in holy light on the morning of the first day of the week following the crucifixion of Jesus. When she goes to the tomb early, all is still dark -- the morning air is dark around her as she walks and her heart is dark within her as she grieves and her thoughts are dark before her as she tries to imagine how the community that has been with Jesus might now carry on without him.

But all these darkesses are dispelled. Mary is brought first into the known light of the daily sunrise which she expects and then into radically new light as the Easter event transforms her life and all creation. She is bewildered when she finds the empty tomb, and then she is astonished when she looks again and sees angels there. Finally, she is filled with joy when the risen Jesus calls her by name and she realizes that her dear teacher, her beloved friend is not dead, but alive.

So much light suddenly surrounds Mary -- the physical light of the sun in the sky, the emotional light of grief transformed to joy, the spiritual light of the new life to which Jesus has been raised so that all might be raised with him.

The holy light of Easter is not confined to a long-ago morning in a far-away garden. It shines still and always even into the dark corners our troubled, hurting world with the brightness of hope, the clarity of mercy, and the power of the infinite love of the Sovereign God.

No darkness -- not the darkness of night or the darkness of fearful cruelty or the darkness of despair - - can thwart God’s intention to bring light and life to us and to all creation. The Resurrection is God’s assurance - God’s decisive declaration - that God chooses to be with us and for us, that God’s life-giving light will meet and overcome empire’s self-interested darkness, that love is stronger than death.

On an early morning long ago, Mary stood weeping in a garden. Then the light shifted, she heard her name, she saw her risen Lord.

Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed.

Alleluia.

Amen.