

April 16, 2017
Jeremiah 31:1-6
John 20:1-8

While it was Still Dark

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on Easter morning. While it was still dark, on the first day of the week, and there was still sorrow. And there was still despair. And there was still doubt and still so much grief over the terrible things that had happened to Jesus. While there was still the not knowing and the not understanding and the not believing. While it was still dark on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb.

It was still dark in Mary Magdalene's world and it was still dark when she came to the tomb that morning. But she came while it was dark anyway. Maybe because she needed to come to the place where they had laid Jesus' body. Maybe she wanted to touch the stone again and feel its cold certainty. And be reminded that all of this was so very real. That Jesus was dead. That he was gone. That it was all over. Maybe she came because she needed to do those things you do when you are grieving. To keep holy company with the dead. To tidy up around the tomb, and pick up the leaves that had collected and, brush away the dirt. Maybe she

came hoping to tend Jesus' body one last time. To finish what she and the other women had done with such haste on Friday. Quickly arranging and preparing his body with the myrrh and the aloes brought by Nicodemus. She could smooth the linen wrappings around him and tuck them in and make sure everything was just so. She could care for him and look after him one last time. Because even in the dark, even in death, there is still love.

What Mary Magdalene came to do is what grieving people do. Kate Braestrup is a chaplain for the Game Warden Service in the state of Maine and on the Moth Radio Hour, she shared her story about serving the bereaved; how she tends to the families who have lost loved ones in outdoor accidents. And she says many grieving people want to see the body of their loved one. They are far, far more likely to regret not seeing it. She says that when they do, when they come to visit the dead, they are gorgeous. A wife takes the hand of her husband to hold it. A parent brushes the hair back from a child's forehead. And a five-year-old girl brings her cousin a toy telescope so he can see things from heaven and then ever so gently tucks him in. Kate says, "You can trust a human

being with grief. Grief is just love squaring up to its oldest enemy. And love is up to the challenge.”¹ And that made me think of Mary Magdalene in our story today, coming to the tomb while it is still dark, because even in the dark, there is still love.

Mary Magdalene came while it was still dark to keep holy company with the dead. Because even in the dark, there is still love. But when she arrives, she sees that things are not as they should be. The stone covering the entrance has been moved. The tomb is standing wide open. Mary fears the worst. She fears thieves. Or grave robbers. She fears further indignity to the one she has lost. She runs to get Simon Peter and the other beloved disciple. And they fear the worst too. And they run to the tomb in the darkness because there is still love. In spite of their fear. In spite of their sadness and disappointment. In spite of the fact that Jesus had let his disciples down. That he had not been the Messiah they had hoped for. That he had not established that new kingdom where the least would be the greatest and the last would be first. That he had failed. That

¹ <https://themoth.org/stories/the-house-of-mourning>

he had been defeated on a cross by his enemies instead of defeating them. But still, there was love. So the disciples ran.

But when they arrived at Jesus' grave, there were no answers only more questions. The tomb was open and empty. The linen wrappings were lying there. The cloth from his head, was folded neatly. But where was he? What had happened? Who had taken him and why? The beloved disciple believes one thing. But Mary and Peter believe something else. They believe it is the darkness striking yet again. It is one more thing to endure. One more terrible act by the Romans or the religious leaders. It is evil having its way again. And they are powerless to stop it. It is still dark for Mary and the disciples, it says in the gospel of John. Literally and spiritually, they are in the dark. They do not know or see or understand what is happening or that God could be present in this.

Perhaps that is true for us too this morning. Perhaps we are in the dark ourselves. Perhaps we understand all too well how terrible things are in the world. How evil seems to stop at nothing. How there is violence and pain and we are powerless against it. How dark it is for families living in terror in Iraq and Syria and Egypt. For people living in refugee camps in

Zimbabwe and Namibia for 20 years and more. For men and women in our own communities devastated by drugs. For children just surviving in the foster care system. For police officers and teachers and public assistance workers and servicemen and women with the impossible task of creating order in all of this. It is still dark out there. As we face job losses and the loss of our health and the loss of our security and the loss of those we love. The loss of our peace and our faith and our hope that things will be OK.

It is still dark, as it was dark on Easter morning. On that morning when Mary went to the tomb, the bad guys were still there and they were still bad. Rome was still there. The Emperor was still there. Pontius Pilate was still there. Those who had crucified Jesus were still there. It was still dark on Easter morning. The religious elite who had condemned Jesus were still there. The chief priests were still there. The Sadducees and the scribes were still there. King Herod was still there. It was still dark on Easter morning. Those who had shouted for Jesus' death were still there. The people caught up in the mob were still there. Those who had shouted: Crucify him, crucify him; they were still there. The world was

still dark on Easter morning. As dark as it is now. As dark as it has always been.

Easter begins in that darkness. And it is darkest part of the story. It is the darkest part of the gospel. Because Jesus is dead and now his body is gone too. There is nothing left of the promise what was. And there is no way now to keep company with the dead. Mary Magdalene weeps at the empty grave. But even in this darkest of places, even when nothing is left and everything has been taken, there is still love. Mary's love is still there. And the good news on Easter Sunday is that God's love is still there too. In spite of everything that has happened. In spite of everything that we did. In spite of how we betrayed God's son. In spite of how we rejected him and mocked him. In spite of how we declared our hatred for him and condemned him, there is still love. With God, there is still love. We say no, but God still says yes. We send God away, but God comes back for us. Because no matter what, there is still love.

In the dark of Easter morning, there is still God's love for us. Even if it hardly seems possible. Even if we have denied like Peter or if we have run away like the disciples. There is still love. Even if we have doubts or

despair, even if we have gone astray. There is still love. Even if we have made mistakes. If life has not been what we thought it would be, if WE have not been who we thought we would be, if we are broken or sinful or in need of a second chance, or a third chance, or a twentieth chance, there is still love. Love that bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love that never ends is risen from the grave on Easter.

Yes, it is still dark. Yes, those doing evil are still there. Yes, those striving for power and profit at all cost are still there. Yes, those misled by mob mentality are still there. Yes, those who fail are still there, those who are broken are still there. But there is still love. And love isn't going anywhere. Love is what resurrection is made of. Love is what makes us who we are and gives us life and calls us by name. And says our job as disciples isn't just to keep company with the dead.

There is still LOVE. There is STILL love. For you. For me. For this world. And as the church, as Jesus' disciples, that's the good news we proclaim. There is still God's love. And that love does two things. First, it calls us by name. Jesus calls Mary by name in the garden and when he

does, she recognizes him. She knows his voice. She knows the one who was dead and gone is now alive. There is still love. And that's the voice calling to us. So, are we listening? On Easter morning, are we listening for the voice of our Lord who lived with love and died with love and was raised with love? Or are we listening for something else? Jesus calls to us today. He calls us by name to know and see and understand for ourselves that there is still love. In spite of the darkness. In spite of death and hatred and fear. There is still love. Can we hear that? Can we hear Jesus calling? What do we need to turn down in order to hear our Savior's voice?

First, love is calling us by name. And second, love is calling us not to hold on to that love for ourselves. God's love is not just for us. It's not just for those like us our circle of friends. Or for us to keep inside the walls of our churches. Or inside the walls of our hearts. Don't hold on to it, Jesus says. Don't hold on to me, Mary. You've got to release me. You've got to release love into the world. Because the world needs to know, it has to know, that there is still love. God's love hasn't gone anywhere. It is still alive and well. So how can we release that love?

How can we turn God's love loose in the world? By growing a Community Garden, working with a refugee family, sharing our money and our time, by slowing down and making family time sacred, inviting a neighbor for dinner, or a stranger for a walk. Listening to others who are different. Making our knee-jerk reaction mercy. What love can we release into our world and our community?

Because for so many people, the world is still dark; it can only be dark. But on Easter morning, the light shines in the darkness. There is still love. And that love is alive and it is here for us today, calling us by name. Saying yes, you, you are mine. I'm still here for you. Christ is risen. There is still love for you and for this world. Christ is risen and there is still love for our neighbors and for strangers and even for enemies. Christ is risen and there is still love for the weak and the wild and the unknown and the lost and the dying. There is still love. There will always be love, now and to forevermore.