

alone!

Anne Lamott in her best-selling book, *Traveling Mercies*, describes her experience with the Living and Resurrected Jesus in this way. For her Easter did not so much burst into her life either, but rather it slowly crept in, like dawn into the darkness, despite her doubts, despite her confusion. As a self-described vagabond agnostic, loose-woman, searching for something, searching in the darkness for the light, she writes:

On the seventh night, though I was very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill...I got in bed, shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill. I had a cigarette and turned off the light. After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner, and I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when I was frightened and alone. The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there—of course, there wasn't. But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus, I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

And I was appalled. I thought about my life and my brilliant, hilarious, progressive friends; I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply

could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."

But one week later I went back to church, I was so hung over that I couldn't stand up for the songs, and this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape. It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up that feeling—and it washed over me.

I began to cry and left before the benediction, and I raced home and felt a presence running along with me, and I walked down the dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said... 'I quit.' I took a long deep breath and said out loud. "All right, You can come in."

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion.

*And here in dust and dirt, O here,
The lilies of His love appear... It is
Easter!*

John 20 give us an Easter that seems to fit each one of us. It gives us an Easter

that can go back home with us when we leave here this morning. Because, you see, if Easter's joy and proclamation required the blare of trumpets, the thunder of pipe organs, and the shining brightness of white banners and vestments—if that type of setting were the *only* place where Easter could thrive—then who among us could take that back home with us? For most of us wake up many mornings "while it is still dark," and we're not sure we can outrun the shadows.

That's why John 20 gives us good news we can live by and also live with. Because somewhere in the shadows of your life and my life, a truly risen Savior is lurking, bursting with new life. It is here. He is here, now. And he knows each of our names. No matter how deep the darkness of our life may seem, no matter how dark the deeds we have done, listen for that voice calling our name. Because he is calling. Listen. Listen for that voice. Listen. Allow him to take hold of us, knowing that he will walk beside us every step of the way. You and I can never fully grasp the resurrection, but we can allow the resurrection to grasp us. It is Easter! Amen.



March 23, 2008

Easter Sunday

Sermon by: Rev. Dr. Carol McCall
Richardson

While It Was

Still Dark

John 20:1-18

First Baptist Church of Memphis
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Waiting in the dark can seem like an eternity before the dawn's first light, particularly this is true if it is the first night we've tried to sleep after a divorce or the death of a beloved spouse or a child; especially if we have just heard the news of a life-threatening illness or have been given severance pay in a job the day before or failed an important test or our boards or failed to get the job or the college of our choice and for thousands of mothers and fathers who are not sure from where the next meal for their children will come or the next bomb. We toss. We turn. We walk the floor. We sigh deeply, waiting for the light.

Here in John's account of the beginning of Easter. There are no trumpets blown, no grand pipe organ played, pulling out all the stops, no dancers of jubilation. In John's account, this Easter morning begins *while it is still dark*. And what is more the Scripture says that it begins on the first day of the week, that is, the first day of the Jewish work week, the first day when Israel, including the disciples of Jesus, is attempting to get back to normal after a particularly bloody weekend.

Easter may lead to the light, but it begins in the darkness, in a desperate attempt to restore life to normal, to get back to business as usual, trying to make sense of life by just doing the next thing in our ordinary day.

This is all Mary is doing—paying her respects, going to Jesus' tomb to convince herself it was all true. It was still dark,

very dark as she tried to find enough light to pick her way to the tomb. It is not clear in John's Gospel what she intended to do once she got there, but we suspect that it was simply to mourn, to weep for a hope that once had been, for a beloved friend and mentor who had died.

But even from a distance she knew something was wrong. She could smell damp earth, cold rock from inside. Someone had moved the stone! Her fear even before she entered the tomb was that someone had taken him away—God knew where—to a steep cliff, to the town dump. His body was all she had left and now it, too, was gone. *It was dark, very dark indeed.*

So Mary ran and brought two of the others back with her. Simon Peter is the first to dare to enter the dank, darkness of the tomb. He sees it is empty and then John leaves a curious detail for us—the grave clothes are still there and neatly folded. If the body was stolen, whoever heard of a neat burglar? Burglaries are messy, stuff scattered and strewn everywhere. No time to tidy up. They might be caught.

John wants his readers to be very clear that the body of Jesus was not stolen. And then in verse 8 we read that the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, *believed*. Did he believe that Jesus had been raised from the dead by the miraculous power of God? I don't think so because verse 9 makes it clear that these two disciples didn't yet understand that

resurrection was a possibility—much less believe it. Perhaps, they simply “believed” the truth of Mary's report (there is no body there) or maybe they had come to believe that something very mysterious, very strange was going on. This was no grave robbery.

In any event whatever tentative conclusions these two drew at that moment, they are reported as simply going back home—no emotion, no confusion, no curiosity reported, just going back home to their ordinary lives, back to business as usual, back to the sweet, anesthetizing reassurance of the mundane and the everyday, the predictable and the stable, leaving Mary to weep alone. If they had tried to lead her away, she refused them. She was like an abandoned sheep that had lost its Shepherd, staying rooted to the last place he had been without the least idea of what to do next.

Even angels couldn't soften her resolve. They were there when she summoned her courage to look inside the tomb, sitting where he had lain. “Why are you weeping?” they asked her. “They have taken away my Lord,” she answered them, “and I do not know where they have laid him.” And no matter how much higher in the horizon the sun had crept by this point in the story, the overwhelming darkness in her life still persisted.

In this desperate state of grief, she leaves the tomb and bumps into the gardener without ever seeing him, being blinded by her tears. His only value to her

was that he might know the answer to her question, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

And this, my friends, is where Easter begins: in darkness and lament, in confusion and in the shadow of death, in our ordinary, mundane lives.

It comes when we least expect it.

“Mary,” he said to her, and she turned to stare at him. “Rabbouni!” she cried, “my Teacher.”

“Do not hold on to me, but go and tell the disciples that I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” Indeed he was on his way to God, and taking the whole world with him!

It is Easter. God has come into our ordinary days—into the darkness of death. . . *The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for thou are with me.*”

It is Easter. God has come into our ordinary days. . . into the shadow of our confusion. . . *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.*

It is Easter. God has come into our ordinary days. . . into the sorrows of this sad world. . . *Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.*

It seems to me that in these gospel details, a claim is being made. That claim is that Easter has something to do with the ordinary, the darkness before the dawn, the assurance of the Living Christ in our midst, the assurance that we do not walk