



Sermon for Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

Isaiah 25:6-9

Psalm 118:1-2,14-24

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Alleluia, Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed, Alleluia!*

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to St. Luke's Episcopal Church on this Easter Day, this Day of Resurrection. Welcome to Resurrection Life. Welcome to Love – the Love that welcomes each and every one of you.

Oh risen Jesus, give us all eyes to see, hearts open to yearn, receive, and embrace you, souls ready and waiting for this new life.

Dear people, today is the culmination of a journey that we in this congregation, and people all around the world, have taken through this year. It is a journey we take together every year. We walk through the awaiting for God's coming, through the birth of Jesus, through his life and all the ways he touched people and cared for them, through his betrayal and suffering and death, to the grave – and now, to this day.

You may be joining us for this day. But please know, there is so much more to all of this than a day that we hail as a great day of celebration, of God's. Behind all of this joy is the path of Jesus Christ that was and has been and always will be God's way of self-giving, self-emptying love.

So—

Happy Easter Day, everyone one!

This is a day for all peoples!

This is a day of feasting!

Cast off the shroud that has been over our hearts --

Christ our God who died has risen, is alive.

Death is conquered.

Souls in captivity to death and hell find release, and Christ leads them to life.

But... it is still dark.

It is still dark when we first get a glimpse of this good, amazing new thing.

It is still dark when Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb.

It is still dark. Today, about this world, we can say, it is still dark. Across the world, death and destruction have claimed the landscape of life for people in Israel and Gaza, in Ukraine and Russia, in nations across the heated central regions of Africa and many nations of the Middle East. Food is scarce in many places, and is getting more challenging to grow and hunt and harvest as the planet warms each year. Housing is a crisis across the world and increasingly a problem in this country. Threats and outbreaks of civil unrest and civil war are everywhere, and racial hostility and class divisions that are fueled by seething hatred festering in dark places in people's souls and being fed in unhealthy places threaten to erupt in violence. It is still dark. In a world of ongoing racism, of hotly and angrily divisive partisan ideologies, of people neglected and abused, it is still dark. There is sorrow and gloom and things that just don't seem to change.

And yet, even in the dark, it just takes one person to see God's life-changing work. Just one person in a community. And that person doesn't even need to fully understand or get it all at once. That person only needs to speak as much as she has seen so far. Even in the darkness of different times of distress, confusion, and uncertainty in our worlds. It only takes one to glimpse that things are changing, and then to invite others to see with him, for light to begin to grow and a door to open for all of us together to wonder, and to step out seeking to see and understand more for ourselves.

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She loved Jesus dearly and was a deeply devoted follower. She was there to come close to her beloved, her hope, her wise teacher who opened life to her in so many new ways.

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene found things had been disrupted. It was in the gloom that change had happened.

But it was still dark. The dawn had not yet begun, but the light was beginning to grow. She did not know what to make of what she had seen. Something had changed – and not in a small way. The stone was rolled away.

As she runs to tell her fellow followers of Jesus what she had found, she began try to interpret what it meant. She began to jump to conclusions, to make sense of it all.

How do we make sense of the surprise, the thing that happens that we never expected? How do we make sense of the stirring of something that unsettles our gloom, that shifts the darkness?

As the sky lightens on her way back to her friends, an idea grows in her, that someone had broken in and stolen Jesus' body. She had no idea who – but that was the only explanation that made sense to her. Someone. A nameless "they" – maybe she thinks it was the religious leaders who had condemned Jesus to death and stirred up the crowds against him, as a final cruel act against Jesus and his followers – maybe she thinks it was the governor's soldiers, as a way of preventing any kind of ongoing adoration or remembering of Jesus – but really, she just doesn't know what to think, so she blurts out to the other disciples, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they've laid him!"

Something new in our darkness can bring distress. As the light begins to spread, it can bring with it new thoughts and feelings, fresh tears. Mary is no doubt crying as she brings her news – and her interpretation of what she has seen – to the people she loves

Two of the other disciples jump up and run, alarmed at the news. They get to the tomb in the dawning light and look in, and even step inside. They see more than Mary saw in the dark – the bands of linen laid out flat, and the cloth head-covering rolled up fresh away from the other cloth. One of them sees this, with Peter his friend by his side, and believes. John's gospel records that "he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand..." This one comes, sees, and believes even before he understands. He opens the door to faith and hope once again.

The light is rising on the first day of recognizing and embracing something new.

But Mary isn't there yet. She has run to follow the other two disciples, back to the tomb. She is with them as they take in what they have seen. I suspect that Peter and the other one don't yet have many words to say, because they are stunned like Mary has been. But something shifts in them, and a new bond of shared reality

grows between them, and they return to where they were staying – to think on these things, to talk with others. And so the light continues to grow and dawn slowly in them.

Mary is still distraught as they leave, and remains at the tomb, still weeping, not knowing how to make sense of it all, looking inside now for what next can help her see and understand.

She sees two angels. Now, let's stop right there. She sees two angels! Sitting there, where Jesus' body had been laid. They are ready to bring good news to her, themselves dressed in light. And they reach out with the tender question to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

Mary is caught still in the darker solution to the puzzle that she had concluded earlier. So, she repeats what she said to the other disciples, this time even more personally – "They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." So, she hardly even seems to see the angels that have spoken to her. It's almost like she is talking to herself, and she turns away before they can answer her.

The light is growing all around, but Mary is still caught up in dark and fearful wanderings, the conviction of her own conclusions. When she turns away from the angels, she sees Jesus. Jesus has stepped into her sight. But in her distress she is still not seeing fully.

This is how it goes for so many of us. In our darkness, in our distress, in the rumbling scripts of our foregone conclusions, we may not see the light growing all around us and the clear presence of new life right in front of us. Conversion happens – but it doesn't come easily and suddenly. It takes time. And it takes us being unsettled. The furniture of our minds, the roads and ruts of our ways of being and thinking and seeing the world and ourselves, our very gut feelings and intuitions – everything gets moved and changed when conversion happens. And it is amazing, and it is unsettling, and it means we are being remade.

Jesus repeats the question of the angels. Jesus notes Mary's sorrow and distress, shows concern, and opens a door for her.

That is what we can do for others around us, in any place. Notice. Knock at the door. Crack it open. Call inside, with care.

So, Jesus speaks directly to Mary, but she does not even recognize his voice. She answers again with the same conclusion she has made, this time asking Jesus if he, himself, had taken the body somewhere.

What saves Mary Magdalene in the end is Jesus calling her name. "Mary."

Simple. Direct. So very personal. "Mary." Jesus says her name, and in saying it is also saying to her, "I know you. I know you so well."

"Mary." And the light really, fully dawns for her. Mary hears Jesus, and now sees him. She is no longer wandering in uncertainty in the gloom. She sees – she really sees – and she knows, and she responds with her whole heart and voice, "Teacher!" And then, she is ready to hear Jesus speak and ready to take in what he has for her to do. "Go and tell the others."

There is a new confidence, a new steadiness in Mary when she arrives to meet the other followers of Jesus. The tears are gone, wiped from her eyes by the warmth of Jesus reaching out to her and calling her to herself. No uncertainty, no second-guessing now. She says directly, "I have seen the Lord." At rest in the new truth of new risen life, she tells the others all she had experienced. She is home. Home in the light of the risen Son.

You have heard me say it before, friends. Jesus saves us by meeting us and calling us by name. Each one of us.

Peter had a longer path of conversion. He had to contend with his own guilt and shame at having abandoned Jesus and denied knowing him at the time of his arrest and cruel public killing. Jesus meets him, and calls him three times by name, asking, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" It takes time for Jesus' question to sink in fully, to touch him at his wounded and self-loathing heart, and to open the doorway for him to come through and open himself fully and honestly to Jesus.

And even as life goes on in faith, our conversion continues. We are not finished being remade, and will not until that final resurrection when all is made new and complete. So, Peter has another moment, as we heard in our second scripture reading today. Peter has not yet opened to the possibility that this risen Jesus is for everyone – EVERYONE, EVERYWHERE. Peter would never have taken a step into the home of Gentile, one of those people outside his own defined tribe and world – and he certainly would never have gone willingly to the home of a Roman leader of garrisons of soldiers. It took a vivid dream-like vision, three times, to open a new way of thinking and seeing for him, to set the stage for him to say "Yes" to a request to visit the house of Cornelius. There, he found people praying to God and devoting themselves to the path of Love. Here, the Light breaks forth for Peter, and the words gush out from him, "Now I truly understand that God shows no partiality." This Good News, Peter, is for everyone. And clearly, Jesus had called Cornelius by name.

Jesus saves us by meeting us and calling us by name. Each one of us.

Jesus knows you. You. Has always known you, and will always know you. Jesus calls to you – knows your name, your identity, your heart and soul, your body in all its parts.

David. Michelle. Rod. Kennedy. Susy. Bill. Chris. Debbie. Natalie. John. Reese. Jean. Mary.

All across the world, he calls each by name. No matter what each has suffered, even no matter what each has inflicted.

Donald. Joseph. Delaina. Xiaojie. Dwayne. Liang. Nashom.

We do not realize it, but in so many moments in our lives we come upon the empty tomb. We meet and see angels announcing good news. We meet Jesus, we hear the Lord of Life calling our name. On the road. In the closed room. In the morning, evening, night. On the lakeshore. In the city square.

In our baptisms in the Episcopal Church, we receive God's embracing love for each of us, by name – and we each take on promises to stay in the fellowship of light, to speak and live with Mary's message "I have seen the Lord," and to search for and recognize and serve Jesus in every person we encounter. These promises contain an important resurrection presumption – that we will indeed meet Jesus in others in our lives, and that we will bring Jesus and be Jesus for others all around us.

Jesus lives! Death is conquered. Christ Jesus rises victorious. And this same Jesus calls you by your name. Now ascended, he is everywhere and is found and shown everywhere.

No matter what your gloom, your darkness, the dawn is breaking. The Son is risen. And Jesus is calling you, even through your confusions and convictions that have blinded you. Open your eyes, your ears, your hearts. New life is here, and is calling you.

So, friends, rise. Come and follow the One who calls you by name. Come and follow the One for whom you yearn. Come and follow Love. And rise.

Stand now with me. Let us name the faith in God that we share with all across the world and all who have gone before us, who have been named and called by Christ Jesus.

The Nicene Creed

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.*

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God,
begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.
On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures;
he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son.
With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*