

In the New Beginning

Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24

Acts 10: 34-43

1 Corinthians 15: 19-26

John 20: 1-18

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Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! Let Israel say, “His steadfast love endures forever.” The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: “The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly.” I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord.

The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death. Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.

I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

Acts 10: 34-43

Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.”

1 Corinthians 15: 19-26

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

John 20: 1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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The darkness was overwhelming, vast and devastating for Mary Magdalene when she rose very early on the first day of the week, the first day after the Sabbath, and went to where Jesus' body rested. In desperate sadness and grief she walked the deserted Jerusalem streets out the city gate to the garden of tombs down in the valley. She went to be with the one who had changed her life, her beloved teacher, the one who had healed her and so many others, the one who loved and cared like no other.

Mary walked through the darkness that was far darker than the remaining night hours. She walked the darkness of grief, that hollow, aching, empty loneliness that mourns the beloved one now gone. She walked through the darkness of having witnessed the brutal death of Jesus. She walked through the darkness of confusion, fear and uncertainty of what was next.

She walked through a darkness we all have known, those times and experiences of walking in the darkness of illness, grief, fear, doubt and uncertainty, of being sick, scared, or sadder than words can express. We have all walked in the darkness of not being able to see what comes next, of not knowing how it will all turn out. It might be waiting in the doctor's office for a diagnosis, or as you pace the floors outside the ICU, or sitting in the unemployment office after you have been down sized, or in the courtroom as a verdict is read, or in the shattered hopes for a marriage as the divorce paper are filed, or facing eviction as you struggle to pay the rent, or in the funeral home making arrangements to honor the life of a loved one and now you wonder just what you will do with your life. It is feeling that you have come to the edge of a cliff because the

ground has just dropped out from under your feet. It is feeling the most excruciating kind of vulnerability and emptiness. Mary walked to the tomb in just that kind of darkness.

Yet there is a wonderful irony here as darkness is not only the place of despair and helplessness; it is the place where new life begins, where bulbs become tulips, where seeds become vegetables, where the next generation is knit together in the womb, where Jesus turned death into resurrection glory. Darkness is the place of new beginnings, of hope.

In her book, *‘Learning to Walk in the Dark,’* Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor realized this while she was on a spelunking expedition. While sitting deep in the heart of Organ Cave in West Virginia, and not able to even see her hand in front of her face, it dawned on her that whatever happened early on that Sunday morning, that first Easter, it happened not in a vibrant celebration and fanfare of light and trumpet blasts, but in “complete silence, in absolute darkness.”

The old cliché that it is always darkest before dawn can remind us that light and life are born from darkness as the birthplace of courage, creativity, and possible impossibilities. Because we cannot see what will happen next, nearly anything can happen. God can slip in and write a brand-new story, can redeem us in ways we could never imagine, can restore and revive from death.

Through the Sabbath Mary had waited so that she could offer Jesus one last act of love, one quiet moment of goodbye. As she entered the garden of the tombs, she did not think that she could feel emptier than she did, until she found the stone rolled away, the tomb empty, and her beloved teacher and friend taken from her. In fear and confusion she ran back to the others, and returned with John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, and Peter, the disciple who Jesus had said he would build his church upon.

Each of them, one by one, looked into the empty tomb and saw different things. John saw the linen wrappings. Peter saw the linen wrappings and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the disciples returned to their homes. Mary, weeping and alone again, looked into the empty tomb and saw two angels in white sitting where Jesus had been.

As she stood weeping by the rolled away stone, the day dawned, and the risen Christ came to her there. In the darkness of her grief, fear and confusion, she saw the gardener who may have been the one to have taken Jesus’ body. In the light of resurrection triumph and joy, Jesus spoke her name, the sound she wanted to hear more than anything in the whole world but could have not imagined it ever being so again. Tears of sorrow turned to tears of rejoicing as she recognized him. Perhaps she even remembered words he had once spoken, “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me.” Easter dawned for Mary not in the rising sun that ended the darkness of the night, but in the resurrected Jesus Christ who broke through the darkness of grief, fear, confusion and pain. In the moment when Mary recognized and rejoiced ‘Rabboni,’ darkness was shattered.

Because Jesus, the first fruits, has been resurrected we too can know the loving, healing, comforting power of his voice, his words, as they break through our darkness. By faith we hear his still small voice speaking to our hearts, calling, comforting, and at times correcting us. We may hear his voice, his words, in an answered prayer, through the advice and counsel of someone well trusted, through scripture, hymns or a sermon. We recognize his voice, and our spirit rejoices to hear it as by faith we see and grasp every hope God offers to us.

Mary rushed toward Jesus full of exuberant, ecstatic joy with her arms spread wide to embrace him, but he said no. Jesus has risen, has returned, and of course she wants to hold onto him, to welcome and greet him. She had come to say goodbye and instead is celebrating their

reunion. Her darkness has given way to an overpowering yearning to hold on so that she would never be separated again.

But “let go” was not all that Jesus said. He said, “Do not hold onto me because I have not yet ascended to God.” Then he sent Mary to tell the others, “I am ascending to my God and your God.”

Jesus took away his being in the flesh but gave Mary, gave us, back his being in God. He denied her an embrace but gave her, gave us, a path to follow, a message to share, and a world to serve.

“Go and tell the others,” Jesus instructed. And Mary, as God’s chosen witness did exactly that.

“I have seen the Lord!” she proclaimed. “The tomb is empty!” She announced. ‘The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom that Jesus was always talking about, where all people will be welcomed and loved, where we are all called to serve and care for each other, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, where greatness is found in service, and power is found in weakness and life is found in death... that kingdom is at hand, and we must help usher it in!’

This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Amen.