

P Christ is risen!
C He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

On this glorious day, I welcome you all to St Paul Lutheran Church and I proclaim to you, what I in turn had received from the Word of the Lord: that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

And this we know because a woman by the name of Mary Magdalene went back a second time to the disciples and announced to them, "I have seen the Lord." She also told others all that the risen Jesus Christ had said to her. For you see the first time Mary arrived at the tomb of Jesus early in the morning, *while it was still dark*, she found the tomb empty, (keep in mind that this darkness is important in this Gospel). So, she went and told Peter and the Beloved Disciple that the tomb was empty. They in turn ran to the tomb, found it empty, didn't understand it, and went back home. But *while it was still dark*, and before they leave the tomb, the Gospel says that the Beloved Disciple goes into the tomb, sees and believes. But Mary returns to the tomb but this time she hangs around long enough for Jesus to greet her and speak to her. Mary then went back to the disciples again and declared to them, "I have seen the Lord"; and she proclaims to them the things Jesus says to her. I wonder what story Peter and the other disciple would have told if Mary would not have returned to them? I have to believe that Mary's proclamation strengthened and even confirmed their belief.

We too have gathered at the tomb of Christ, it's called church, and Christ greets us here in the proclaimed Word, and in this Holy Meal that also strengthens and even confirms our belief. And the very presence of Jesus Christ tells us in Word and in Sacrament of God's love for the world...a love that does not condemn us, but a love that is given to us at the cost of the life of Jesus Christ who is grace upon grace, not just for us in here...but for the world and all that are in it.

Obviously, in this Gospel of John, Mary is a key figure in the Easter story, however the thing that grabs my attention immediately is that Mary tells others, unlike the other disciples who returned home. When she speaks about what she experienced at the tomb, she makes a very poignant statement to Peter, the Beloved Disciple, and to the angels present at the tomb. She says that the Lord is gone and she basically repeats these same words to the one who she believes to be the gardener, Jesus Christ Himself. Her statement is unique to John's Gospel because her statement and when she says it means more than it initially seems to mean.

In this Gospel of John, we hear that Mary came to the tomb early in the morning, while it was still dark. It also says that the other disciples arrived at the tomb, while it was still dark, but it says that they did not understand. In this Gospel, light and darkness play an important role in that, darkness lasts until someone believes in the Risen Jesus. Darkness is also the separation from Christ or the disbelief in Christ. Darkness is also not understanding when we consider this encounter at the empty tomb in the darkness of early morning. We see this clearly the night before his crucifixion when Jesus is betrayed by Judas. Judas receives the bread from Jesus and he immediately gets up from the table and goes out into the darkness. John is showing us the separation of Judas from the Lord and the betrayal because he goes away from the light of Christ into the darkness.

If you recall, Nicodemus a Pharisee or an enemy of Jesus comes to him in the darkness of night. But we see that darkness is overcome later in this Gospel when Nicodemus defends Jesus and later prepares his body for burial. In this passage before us today, we hear that Mary comes to the tomb early in the morning, but it is still dark indicating that she too is separated from the Lord. However, in the darkness of early morning, Mary thinks the Lord is gone. But is the Lord gone from Mary, Peter, and the Beloved Disciple? Meaning...is the Lord gone, never to be seen again, or is he gone because of their lack of faith in what he promised? Or is Christ gone due to their misunderstanding? The darkness indicates that the Lord is simply gone from their presence and their understanding and NOT gone never to be seen.

One can probably say with some assurance that Mary's darkness may be brought on by fear or that she may be showing a lack of faith due to the separation from the Lord...in her darkness the Lord is gone and she doesn't know where. Her darkness may be her frustration because she cannot find the body, and she is probably more than just a little angry and running out of faith. After all that she has seen the Lord go through, the interrogation, the torture, the humiliation, and the denigration, along with the sheer pain and suffering on the cross, and now, even in death, she must be thinking, even in death he must suffer whatever they have done to his body.

It seems that Mary is becoming overwhelmed by the darkness. Is she beginning to lose her faith? Mary is in the darkness of fear and confusion, along with the other disciple who returns home with Peter...in the darkness of confusion and perhaps doubt. But one thing is for sure, we can see that Mary's faith may be in the darkness of her struggles in this moment, be her faith in the Lord, and her love of the Lord will not keep her in that darkness.

Think about the "dark-times," when tragedy, doubt, or confusion entered into our lives and made us feel separated from the Lord. Perhaps when we felt abandoned by the Lord and we could not seem to find the Lord in the darkness of our emotions. Maybe we felt the darkness was a punishment, or we were darkened in anger and just wanted nothing to do with the Lord. When we felt we were lost or that we hid in that darkness, what were the thoughts and feelings running through our minds?

No matter how overwhelming that darkness seems, the Good News of Jesus Christ is found in that very darkness because our anger, our hurt, our doubt, our confusion, or any other emotion we can think of were more than likely directed at God...in that we ask, why would God do this to me? The Good News remains the same this day for Mary and for us...just as it has been since the beginning of time when we fell into the darkness of original sin. If you recall Genesis, in the garden after Adam and Eve ate from the tree, we hear this:

Then the eyes of both (Adam & Eve) were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.⁸ They heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, (*its getting dark*)¹ and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.⁹ But the LORD God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" (Genesis 3:7-9)

¹ My words to emphasize the darkness that is beginning

In the darkness of their fear, they hid themselves. But it was God who sought them out and it was God who found them. Today in our Gospel lesson, Mary in the darkness of her fear and frustration cannot recognize the Lord and it is the Lord who shines His light upon her darkness when he simply says, “Mary!” It is the Lord Jesus Christ who finds Mary in her confusion. It is in that darkness that Mary doesn’t know where to find the Lord. However, the Good News is that the risen Christ finds Mary just as the Lord stands in front of each of us in our frustration, our confusion, and our hurt. We direct all our stuff at God but just like Mary, and it is that stuff that only sees a gardener instead of seeing the Lord Jesus Christ.

Once again, in a few moments the Risen Christ will find us and feed us His grace and life with his very body and blood in this Holy Meal. Jesus has returned to Mary, not as a crucified, dead body but as a living Lord who reaches out to her. In this Gospel lesson the resurrection isn’t just about Jesus being raised from the dead; it is that he returns to Mary and later in the Eastertide we will hear that he returns to the very people who have deserted him. And of course, he returns to us here today in this proclaimed Word and in this Holy Meal.

The Rev. DR. Robert Jenson notes that the scriptures do not report early Jesus sightings; they describe Jesus’ appearances. It is an important difference. Resurrection, revelation is entirely in God’s hands, something God does. In resurrection God not only defeats death but also overcomes the limits of human perception and relationship...and I would add that God stands in our darkness and that darkness does not overcome God’s presence. The first result of resurrection was not eternal life for us but rather appearance to us, revelation.² In other words, despite the darkness that limits of our human perception and relationship, the Lord Jesus Christ finds us and the Scriptures assure us that God so utterly and completely loves us.

The Lord finds us today through our faith here at this tomb we call the church, and the Lord Jesus Christ is here with us in Word and Sacrament. In these things is life, the life and the light for all people. His light shines in the darkness of our lives and our world but the darkness does not overcome it. But now what? Do we return home and say nothing? Or do we say or do something?

Instead of feeding into the darkness of the world, do we attempt to be the light of grace or do we just return home in the darkness of defeat? But simply saying something is as Martin Luther King, Jr., speaking on behalf of Memphis garbage workers the night before he was assassinated 57 years ago on April 3, 1968 declared:

It’s all right to talk about long robes over yonder, in all of its symbolism, but ultimately people want some suits and dresses and shoes to wear down here. It’s all right to talk about streets flowing with milk and honey, but God has commanded us to be concerned about the slums down here, and his children who can’t eat three square meals a day. It’s all right to talk about the new Jerusalem, but one day, God’s preacher must talk about the new New York, the new Atlanta, the new Philadelphia, the new Los Angeles, the new Memphis.³

² William H. Willimon commentary for Logos Productions entitled, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 41, No. 1, Year C, January, February, March 2013-“Christ Appears to Us” pages 57-60.

³ Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Melvin Washington, San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1986, p. 282.

Easter has come out to greet us this day, because God has found us in the darkness of our lives, but as DR. King reminds us, we cannot sit safely in the presence of Jesus and hold fast to the grace and mercy we are given, because eternal life is here and now, our faith in it is here and now in the grace we put to work in the darkness...we make a new New York, we make the new Atlanta, we make the new Philadelphia, we make the new Los Angeles, and the new Memphis. This is our calling and this ought to be our faith in action. Christ reminds us:

For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13:15)
He then reminds us:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

We are here today because Mary went back to the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord"; and she proclaims to them the things Jesus says to her. Today the Holy Gospel tells us that the darkness of the night has passed, it is Easter morning, Christ has risen indeed, and in this Holy Meal, Jesus comes to us once again...and His light of grace shines brightly upon us on this glorious day...may others see this light of grace in each of us as we make His grace and life known not just in words but in deeds and in truth. In the reality we celebrate this day, our sin is completely taken away by God's complete and utmost love for us and we share this glory by letting our faith move us to proclaim in words and in deeds, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen