

## John 20: 1-18 While It Was Still Dark

It is wonderful to be in worship with you on my first Easter in Jemez Springs. Many of us come this morning with our own memories of Easters past. My memory of Easter growing up in my small church in Tokyo was receiving a tiny card shape of a small brown egg, and when I opened it, a cute little chicklet popping up from the fold. That's how I was taught that Easter was about new life.

And we are building on our memories, creating together new Easter memories for our little ones here. Yesterday, I could see that the grownups felt as much joy watching the children as the children had fun coloring the eggs. This year our church inherited this fun family tradition from American Legion who had done it for many years, and we hope to continue creating for them the memories of being at church on Easter.

And this morning, some of us gathered at the mission church ruins at Jemez Historic Site for the sunrise service, a joint service with the Baptist churches, for the first time since we stopped because of the Pandemic. And then, the Easter Community Breakfast is back, too, served by the men of this congregation as it had been the tradition. (Though the man who started it had been prompted by his wife, his legendary wife herself just told me yesterday.)

And now, after a particularly snowy winter, we are back worshipping in the sanctuary, without being chilled to the bone. We removed the black shroud that was blocking the beautiful view from the window in order to cut the glare from the sunlight on the projector screen, because we don't need to project anymore now that we have the printed Order of Worship again, something we couldn't have during the height of the pandemic.

So, this Easter, this sense of "life is back" is felt all the more keenly. And we welcome it and embrace it as it comes back to us wrapped up in the comforting familiarity of tradition. We experience it as a cyclical, seasonal return of the long-awaited spring, the season of new life. We began this morning worship proclaiming "Christ is Risen! He is risen, indeed." **But, that first Easter day began very differently; it began "While It Was Still Dark," and there was nothing familiar about it.**

At the top of your Order of Service in your hand, you see a picture of the empty tomb with the stone rolled away; it has become for us a symbol of the Easter morning. Of course, the stone is rolled away, it's the morning of Christ's resurrection! We've been anticipating this moment from... the beginning of Lent. On Ash Wednesday, we were marked with the ashes

from the Palms of the year before, reminding us that, even as we return to dust, our bodily death has something to do with the mystery of Easter that brings life out of death.

Many people endure fast or other spiritual discipline during Lent, because they know Easter comes at the end; in fact, people who want to become Jesus's disciples prepared themselves to be baptized on Easter. We can bear to hear the agonizing story of Jesus's crucifixion on Good Friday, because we know, after Good Friday and Holy Saturday comes the Resurrection Sunday. In the church tradition, there was this great hope and anticipation culminating in Easter and we live that tradition.

**But it wasn't so on that First Easter morning.** It wasn't so for the one who first saw the stone rolled away. It wasn't so for Mary Magdalene, the first disciple who encountered the risen Lord.

When Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark, she was fully expecting, or even desperately hoping to see the tomb securely closed with the large stone, with Jesus' body safely resting inside. Or perhaps she had feared someone might steal his body, because when she arrived at the garden and saw the stone had been rolled away, she jumped to the conclusion, someone stole his body!

There was something very wrong about this picture of the empty tomb with the stone rolled away, she didn't even look inside; she was convinced someone must have pried open the tomb and stole him. When we are worried or fearful, we can only see through the lens of that fear, and it makes us believe the worst.

The first Easter morning was not an occasion to sing Alleluia; for Mary it was her worst fear came true... or so she thought. To have her beloved Teacher and Lord Jesus die was bad enough, but to have his body stolen? Perhaps she was carrying this fear all along, and perhaps it was what drove her to come to the tomb so early, when it was still dark.

Or perhaps, she just wanted to be close to Jesus, even if it was his lifeless body. The first time I had to leave my house for a short trip after I had brought my husband's ashes home. I hid the urn of his ashes behind the books in the bookshelf, so that in case someone broke into my house while I was gone, he'd be safe. For Mary, it must have been like coming home and saw someone had broken in.

Now gripped by despair and in near panic, she runs to the other disciples to tell them what she saw. With the report from Mary, Peter, and the disciples whom Jesus loved (who shall remain nameless) run to the tomb and they see. **They came and saw.**

Does that remind you of anything? Do you remember the story of Jesus and first disciples? After Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, at the very beginning of Jesus's earthly ministry, two of John the Baptist's disciples followed Jesus, because John the Baptist said, "there goes the Lamb of God." When Jesus noticed them following him, he turned around and asked them. "What are you looking for?" and the two disciples ask Jesus "what are you staying?" Jesus's answer to them was "Come and See." Now they came and saw where Jesus IS NOT staying. The nameless disciple came and saw and believed: Jesus left the death behind.

Now, Mary is back at the tomb, too. This time she goes inside and what does she see: two angels! But the grief-stricken Mary doesn't care, they're not Jesus; it's Jesus's body she's looking for to reclaim. As a volunteer chaplain for the ABQ Police Dept., I get to stay with the family members of the deceased, until their loved one's body is transported away. I've witnessed the pain of letting their loved one's body go, even when we know the life has left it, and no words of comfort can make it okay.

And no words can describe God's love that gave us life, carries us through and beyond our death into eternal life. So, God acted. First by sending Jesus, the incarnated love of God, into our world, and now that Jesus has finished his work in the world, by raising him from death and having him appear before Mary.

But Mary is still under the grip of fear and despair, trapped in her own imaginary thinking, she cannot perceive this reality, God's reality, unfolding before her own eyes. We are no different. When the life seems particularly disastrous and hopeless, we cannot perceive God's saving work behind it, can we?

She needed to hear Jesus call her name to recognize him. Mary recognized Jesus's voice, like a sheep knows the shepherd's voice. Would we recognize Jesus's voice in the midst of despair?

Imagine Mary's surprise and delight in seeing Jesus, now her risen Lord! "Rabbouni!" My teacher! She calls out. During the last supper, Jesus acknowledged that his disciples rightly called him Teacher and Lord, but now the risen Jesus who will return to God calls them his siblings, saying his God is our God: we are one family.

Do not hold on to me, Jesus tells her, because the time of his physical presence with the disciples, as someone we could cling to, is over. His human, corporeal physical presence is gone, destroyed on that cross by the weight of the sin of humanity, but only for him to return to God, so that as the risen Christ who is now with God, he can be with everyone, everywhere, all at once! But not like that Oscar winning movie with multiple universes of parallel realities, but in the One Ultimate Reality of the realm of God, where we live as a family. This is the good news and invitation of Easter. Jesus tells Mary Magdalene, the first disciple to meet the risen Christ not to “come and see,” **but to “go and tell.”**

On this side of the resurrection and ascension of Christ, this ultimate reality of God permeates our world; the resurrected Christ meets us in ER and ICU, in prison cells and at funeral homes, in war zones and in broken homes. And he remains with those who are fearful and afraid, in your bodies and mine.

Easter that started while it was still dark ends not with a happy ending, but something even better, a happy new beginning. A beginning of new way of walking and following the risen Christ, a beginning of living the eternal life even with our feet firmly on the ground in this broken and fearful world, a beginning of learning to live and love without fear, for nothing now can separate us from the Love of God in Jesus Christ our risen Lord, and from one another, our brothers and sisters. Happy Easter, everyone.