

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word

April 5, 2015

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First Presbyterian Church

Clarksburg, WV

John 20:1-9

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. (John 20:1 N.R.S.V.)

While It Was Still Dark

I am a child of God. I believe in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. And I believe he has the power to change my life and your life.

The late comedian Grady Nutt was a regular on the old *Hee Haw* show. He was a great story teller. One of his stories was about a church that had invited an evangelist to preach on Sunday morning. The evangelist began his sermon by saying, "One of these days we are going to wake up and look outside and say, 'It's dark out there.'" The pastor of the church, seeking to be encouraging said, "O Lord, help us!"

The evangelist continued, "So we are going to get on the phone and call Washington, D.C. and they are going to say, 'It's dark out there.'" The pastor said, "O Lord, help us!"

The evangelist said, "We are going to call up San Francisco and they are going to say, 'It's dark out there.'" The pastor said, "O Lord, help us!"

The evangelist was on a roll now. "We are going call up Hong Kong, China and they are going to say, 'It's dark out there.'" The pastor said, "O Lord, what a phone bill."

In our text from John, Mary goes to the tomb on Easter morning, while it is still dark out there. That darkness was two fold. It was literally dark out because the sun had not yet come up. There were no street lights back then, so Mary was stumbling along in the dark of the night.

It was also dark in the sense that Mary and the disciples were sunk deep in grief and despair. The events of the past few days must have seemed like a terrible nightmare from which they could not wake up. Jesus, their beloved master had been arrested in the night. He had been brutally beaten, dragged before the Roman governor for a travesty of a trial, and sentenced to death by crucifixion.

The Roman soldiers had mocked him and abused him, forced him to carry his own cross, joked and laughed when he stumbled and fell. Mary and the other women had been there, watching in

horror. They watched in shock and anguish, powerless to stop these terrible things.

At Pilate's command Jesus had been nailed to the cross and above his head a sign that said, "The King of the Jews." Jesus had died on that cross. Still later, Joseph of Arimathea had asked for the body of Jesus. Pilate having made sure that Jesus was dead, granted the request. The Jewish Sabbath began at sundown on Friday so Joseph assisted by Nicodemus had to hurry and get the body down and into a tomb before the sun went down.

It was a sad and rushed affair, lacking in dignity and the familiar funeral rituals of the day. Perhaps that is why Mary is here so early on Sunday morning. It was time for a ritual anointing of the body, and this at least Mary was determined to do both timely and appropriately. To her dismay, the stone on the tomb has been rolled away and the body is gone.

Note that Mary has no thought that Jesus would be resurrected. Her only thought is that someone has stolen the body and heaped even more indignities upon it. I think of the rage many of us felt when a few years back an American soldier was killed and his body dragged through the streets of Somalia by a group of laughing thugs.

It must have been truly terrible for Mary too. The darkness of the night was combining with the darkness of exhaustion and despair. But God, was working while it was still dark, and he resurrected Jesus from the dead. He brought him back to life, and we along with him.

Reflect with me for a moment how many times the Bible repeats that theme. In the beginning, there was nothing. Everything was dark and empty. But then God, . . . created the universe, light, life, and us.

In Egypt our ancestors became stuck in the darkness of slavery. They were helpless and hopeless in the face of their oppressors. But then God, . . . while it was still dark, sent Moses and freed them from slavery. He brought them through the waters of the Red Sea. God sent them manna to eat in the wilderness, water from a rock, until finally he ushered them into a land of milk and honey.

The Israelites were up against an army of the Philistines. They cowered in the darkness of the shadow cast by the Philistine Champion, Goliath. But then God, . . . while it was still dark, brought a boy named David to the scene. With God's help this mere boy killed the great giant Goliath with just a sling shot.

In the dark hour of Roman oppression, when God's people were far from him, God was at work. All seemed to be lost, swallowed by the darkness. But then God . . . sent his son, Jesus into the world to take on human flesh, to teach us and show us God's way, and to die. But that was not the end, while it was still dark, God had already resurrected Jesus and set him free from death.

There is a time-honored story that someone asked Joseph of Arimathea why he was willing to allow Jesus to be buried in his own tomb. Joseph shrugged and said, "It's no big deal. He only

needed it for the weekend!”

One of my favorite comedians of all times is the late George Burns. George was married to the love of his life, Gracie Allen. For years they were a well-known comedy team. Gracie died in 1964. George didn't die until 32 years later at the age of 100. When Gracie died, George was devastated. One of the things that George kept close to him following her death was a love note that always encouraged him. The note said, “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.”

That is great advice. We will all hit dark times in our lives when all seems to be lost. It may feel as if there is no way out for us. But then God, . . . will amaze us all over again. Hold on to that truth, allow it to flourish and grow in your heart.

Today we celebrate Easter, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Easter is not only the glorious reminder that those who believe in Christ as their Lord and Savior will also be resurrected to eternal life with Christ, it is also the ultimate reminder of the victory we have in Christ.

The world may get very dark for us, but we do not lose hope. We know that while it is still dark God is working. Easter is the ultimate sign to us that evil will not win. Hate, pain, oppression and suffering will not have the last word. God will have the last word. That last word is life!

Jesus Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.

Amen.