

When It Was Still Dark

Just as the events which transpired on that first morning of discovery, the events which we celebrate today are the crucial ones for us today as they were when it was discovered that Jesus' burial site appeared very different than it was when that dead body was placed within the borrowed tomb. We have four different accounts of what was found, each one written many decades after that day, and were written to different groups of believers which is probably why there is not just one account. This is the morning that we are most likely to declare the essence of that discovery in the briefest statement of our faith: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! This is a festive proclamation of good news. In Christ God has overcome the powers of sin and death, freeing us to live with hope and promising us life. And what we often fail to lift enough is that we are offered not just life after death, but full life, divinely inspired life, life in the here and now; not just existence. The gospel accounts despite their differences could hardly be clearer on that the main point: the tomb has been opened and Jesus' body is not there. The disciples and the women who come to the tomb are living with great sorrow; they believe the one who gave them hope has died. It is the women who first make this discovery about what has taken place. It seems the men see no reason to visit the burial site, the crucifixion has happened and nothing more can be done to continue the mission we to bring God's reign nearer. Neither Matthew's gospel nor John's tells why anyone would go to the site. They differ in who goes, with John only describing Mary Magdalene while Matthew has two women named Mary arriving. Since Matthew's gospel was written long after the event he is careful to provide proof that there was more than one witness to the discovery and although none of the accounts give a description of the resurrection. The early believers had to contend with the rumors spread by the authorities that disciples had just removed and hidden the body in order to discount the gospel news. Rome had desired not only to destroy Jesus but to bring an end to the movement he had inspired. Matthew's account is the most dramatic because as the women approach there is an earthquake, then an angel descends to move the stone away and then sit upon it. There is no description of Jesus leaving the tomb but the angel invites them to enter the tomb and verify that it is empty. The angel provides them with the crucial fact that the crucified Jesus is not there. "He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said." It is significant that when Mary Magdalene arrives it is still dark and the stone has been rolled away from the opening. Darkness within John's gospel always is associated not just with the degree of daylight but is also firmly connected to perception, to seeing and understanding. Until she discovers the difference at the tomb, she is in the darkness of not believing or understanding what Jesus had told them before his arrest and death. Even what she sees doesn't ease her grief because she doesn't understand what the empty tomb means, she fears that "someone" has indeed stolen Jesus' body so she runs to tell the disciples what she has found. Two of them come, Simon Peter and another. They confirm the tomb is empty but although John's gospel states that while Peter went in and looked, the other stayed outside but believed. John doesn't tell us what he believed had occurred, but they did not try to share. Instead they both went back home as nothing had changed for them. Mary remains at the tomb site and so then sees two angels sitting where Jesus' body had been laid. John does not offer any explanations about why they haven't been observed earlier, either by Mary or by Peter and the other disciple. But perhaps because Mary is now weeping, they speak to

her and are seen. When they ask why she cries, her response is the same as earlier, she fears Jesus' body has been taken away to an unknown place. But this comment now results in her seeing Jesus standing behind her, but she still is in the dark...she misidentifies him as a gardener when he also asks why she is weeping. It isn't until he calls her by name that she knows him. When she has recognized him, he gives her a message...to go tell his brothers...and she does proclaiming to them: "I have seen the Lord." This allows Mary to think the unthinkable. Jesus has been resurrected from the dead. And he no longer calls those he called disciples or followers but brothers. Despite their desertion, his love and grace still enfolds them as brothers. Despite Mary's proclamation to them, there is no indication in the gospels that those Jesus now calls brothers are ready to believe what has happened. It is not until the rest of the story unfolds through Luke's narration known as Acts that this amazing event is believed. It is Mary's love and zeal which define this story...it is her witness that begins the unfolding of the truth that the Roman cross could not end the mission Jesus came to reveal...the mission to bring God's reign near. During John's telling of this event the theme is that Mary is searching for Jesus and then finds him. Illumination happens as the power of the spoken word by the Word himself says her name. Mary has persisted in being present, persisted in wanting to honor this man she loved, has stayed present in her grief and sought the Lord. She kept looking and seeking and was found by her Lord. She saw, she heard, she understood. Then she is told to go and do for him. Does that sound familiar? Isn't that what happens for us. Through the seeking of God's presence, we are found by our Lord. Then we are asked to join in the endeavor; to continuing proclaiming that God's reign can be; is in fact near, when we seek to draw closer to his ways. Donald Juel, a New Testament scholar and professor at Princeton Theological Institute once wrote this reflection on the resurrection account in the Gospel of Mark...the first and the briefest account we have...by saying that "none of the Gospels can really end the story of Jesus. The whole point is that it continues...and that its significance continues." Christ's resurrection means that the story of Jesus is on-going...the story of Jesus one that continues...not just in the book of Acts...but in us: in you and in me and in every life that is touched by the power of the good news that "He is risen!" It is interesting that Matthew and John, like Mark, do not elaborate on the meaning of Christ's resurrection. The Gospel announces and does not explain. The good news is announced. The command is given to go and spread the word. The reason for this is that no amount of explanation can adequately explain the meaning and significance of Easter. Perhaps they were aware that all the words in the world could not explain the meaning of the resurrection. They were focused on the task given them to go and spread the word. It is then up to us to see, hear, understand and believe what the gospels tell us about God, God's love and the amazing extent with which he reaches out to us. Within Matthew's account we are reminded that Jesus told them what to expect...three times he told them both that he would suffer and die and also be raised in three days. Yet they remained unprepared. So after over two thousand years of knowing this story, what does it mean for us to believe the resurrection? Scripture tells us Christ was raised from the dead. Our good news is that God raised Christ from the dead. God is the subject of that sentence and Christ is the object. That means that God is the one doing the resurrecting. We usually like to think of ourselves as the subject of sentences, we don't like being objects. We consider ourselves people who do things, people who are in control of what happens. Believing the resurrections means saying good-bye and letting go of trusting in ourselves and instead

trusting in the power of God. To believe the resurrection means we know that Christ being raised will never die again. Death no longer has dominion over him as Paul stated in Romans 6. He has left the tomb and has gone on ahead of us...first to Galilee and then into the whole world. Wherever we are headed he has already journeyed along the road ahead of us. He will be the first one to greet us when we arrive. He has broken the power of sin and death. He has delivered us from death to the life eternal. So we do not need to live in fear. We are set free to seek faithfulness without the fear that we can be destroyed. The most frequent command in Scripture—appearing even more often than any other—is the command not to be afraid. Jesus' first greeting is often "Do not be afraid", just as it is Christ's first word to those at the tomb. To believe the resurrection means we will strive to live without fear. Fear of each other. Fear of the people with whom we disagree. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the future. Fear of death itself. This will liberate us from the grave of anxiety and worry and allow us to live as God's people in this world. We can accept the grace of the resurrected Christ who calls those who deserted him brother and sister. Grace offered despite our own desertions of God's ways, our sins, our own brokenness and our own mistakes. Thanks be to God for raising this Jesus from the dead. May the resurrection power of God raise all of us to new life. Amen.