

“Beyond the darkness”

EASTER SUNDAY

April 24, 2011

Text: *Jeremiah 31:1-9, John 20:1-18*

I.

On that first Easter morning, so many years ago, it was still dark when Mary Magdalene got up ... *she couldn't sleep*. All night, she'd been thinking about Jesus; and she left for the tomb.

Darkness was everywhere, it seemed. What an awful series of events had unfolded since Friday. She could sense things were slipping out of control; the tension had been building for days, even more.

What was the matter with all of those people ... other Jews—her own people—crying *Crucify him, crucify him?* And then Pilate washed his hands of things and sent his soldiers off to nail him to a cross ... like so many others before him. People knew about crucifixion.

It had all happened so fast ... the worst possible nightmare.

And Jesus had died ... there on the cross ... and then they put him in the tomb. And she was rising early to go and attend to his body before anything more might happen to him. As she made her way to the site of the tomb—again, darkness was everywhere ... and it was hard to see—and she noticed: the stone in front of the tomb had been rolled away.

What did it mean? And where was Jesus?

And, gradually, the darkness began to give way to the light; but, again, where was Jesus? Where did they take him?

And suddenly, a powerful light began to build up around her ... and she was weeping ... and, almost instantly, the light began to fill her spirit ... and she turned around and saw JESUS standing there, but she didn't recognize him.

Why are you weeping, Jesus asked her? But she still did not recognize him; and she asked him if he knew what had happened with the body of Jesus?

And then Jesus, appearing to her in spirit, said, *Mary, Mary!*

Rabbi, she said, sensing his presence, but in disbelief.

It is I, said Jesus ... *but, you cannot touch me ...but go to my brothers and tell them what you have seen and experienced. They need to know, that they might believe.*

II.

Beyond the darkness ... on the other side of the long night of sorrow and grief and endless tears.

But how can this be? I suppose, in a sense, Easter is the ultimate *happy endings* story. That's certainly part of it. It has been an unspeakably painful few days, as the worst fears of Jesus' followers have come to pass.

A father took his four-year old little boy to a pet shop to pick out a puppy for his birthday. For half an hour the child looked and looked at all the puppies in the window.

Have you decided which one you want yet, his father asked?

Yes, daddy, the little boy sounded back. Pointing to one of the puppies who was enthusiastically wagging his tail, he said, *I want the one with the happy ending.*

And don't we all! But of course, Easter is more than a *mere* happy ending. It's a powerful affirmation:

- of the power of light to overcome darkness ... the power of goodness to defeat sin ... the power of love to transcend death.
- It's HOPE, without borders ... HOPE unleashed on the world.

As Easter people, friends, we believe that darkness is never the last chapter ... in anything. Why? Because we know that the darkness always gives way to the dawn. It's built into the DNA of the universe ... and into the DNA of our Creator God as well.

With God and with the life of faith, LIGHT is always on the way. It is always coming. We simply have to believe it ... and to look for it ... and to embrace the world through the HOPE God's light reveals.

III.

In Bunyan's **Pilgrim's Progress**, as the pilgrim begins to feel the forward pull of his journey, the question put to him by the evangelist is: ***Do you see that gate over there?*** (the gate being the symbol of ultimate meaning and purpose). ***No,*** he answered, but with a notable tone of negativity in his voice.

Well, then, do you see the light over there?

Yes, I think I do, he replied. **I'm quite sure I do.**

Well, keep that light in your eye ... and go directly there ... because then you'll see the gate.

In other words, then everything will make sense; your life will have meaning and purpose. **Keep the light in your eye!** It's the light of love, the light of hope, the light of God's truth and purposes for the world.

Friends, that's the message of Easter. ***We're to keep the light in our eye!***

- The light that no darkness can eclipse or put out.
- The light that warms the heart—everyday—with God's presence *bending everything towards love* ... reassuring us, again and again, that—no matter what comes our way in life—God is with us. We are not alone.

IV.

Sometimes in this world, admittedly, it's hard to see **beyond the darkness** ... because the darkness, at times, seems ubiquitous. It seems to be everywhere.

1. It's in the economy, struggling on life support to get back on its feet.
2. It's in the cynicism in Washington in trying to inject an element of sanity into the congressional discussion around debt reduction.
3. It's in trying to sort out a fair and equitable tax code ... and health plan ... and vision for education ... and a responsible plan for the environment.

LIGHT shines into the darkness in all of these situations, saying: ***do the most loving thing*** ... whatever it is ... ***and the most loving thing is whatever shows compassion for the greatest number of people—always to include the most vulnerable.***

Beyond the darkness, the LIGHT of Easter proclaims to the world that God has come ... and with a word of hope.

The stone is rolled away; Jesus is not there. Somehow, he is alive ... and his spirit pulsates in the presence and in the hearts of his followers—reaching out ... embracing ... drawing them in ... making all things new.

V.

I'm reminded of the scene in **Alice in Wonderland** where the caterpillar, running into Alice, asks, ***Who are you?***

Somewhat startled, she replies, *Well, I ... I hardly know, sir, just at the present. I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then.*

Alice, too, sees things differently as, all around her, newness is breaking through.

Beyond the darkness ...

EASTER calls us always to the transforming *light* of the moment, to the *light* of today. It calls us to a *bending towards love* ... in everything ... with everybody with whom we interact.

On the other side of yesterday; on the other side of our sorrows ... disappointments ... failures ... rejections ... regrets ... anger. The next time any of this darkness threatens to take over your life, remember, *you don't live there anymore.*

**The stone is rolled away. Christ is risen!
God has spoken. It's a new day.**

In other words, don't let the negative forces of life tell you who you are! Grab a hold of today with the hope and promise that *bend everything towards love.*

VI.

Author **Richard Wile** remembers, painfully, the death of his only daughter when she was only 18 years old. He remembers how paralyzed he was with grief and how it lasted for months on end. It was like this poison had been injected into his spirit. And he didn't know how he would ever find relief from its awful ache.

Then one EASTER morning he went to church. The preacher spoke about **the fear that keeps people from knowing the joy of life.** *When we embrace the resurrection in faith,* he said, *it moves us beyond our fears to a faith awareness that we are alive in God.*

Suddenly, in a service of EASTER worship, Richard Wile had a new sense of the power of Christian faith. If his daughter were *alive in God*, then he should be sending out his love to her, for she could receive it in her resurrected life. HELLO!

As he began to do this in the weeks ahead, one day, to his utter surprise, he had the clear sense that his daughter was standing beside him with her arm on his shoulder. Wow! What a powerful moment!

I wept, he relates. *Both from the sadness that I could not hold her and for the joy of knowing that she was alive in God.*

VII.

What EASTER is about, friends ... **beyond the darkness** ... on the other side of all the death and cynicism ... what EASTER is about is a *warming of the heart ... that bends our lives towards love*. In everything that we do: the way we think, the way we act and the way we inter-relate with everything and everybody.

When our lives *bend towards love*, we are alive in God. Our EASTER joy is the joy of the **Psalmist** ... from **Psalm 118**:

*I thank you that you have answered me, O God, and have become my salvation.
The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.*

*This is the day that the Lord has made;
Let us rejoice and be glad in it!*

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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