

“While it is Still Night”

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Text: John 20:19-31

It's still night when Mary gets up and gathers the spices for the body lying in the tomb. The women had worked since Jesus was crucified, plucking the seeds, extracting the oils, and distilling the perfumes that they would need to prepare the body. It was Jewish custom in the ancient world that a body would be washed, then covered with ointment and perfume, and then wrapped in strips of cloth. The accounts are different in the gospels, but it seems that Jesus' body was not properly treated. And Mary could not allow her teacher to rot in a tomb without a proper burial. And so, she gets up, while it is still night.

And I don't think that the book of John is simply talking about the placement of the sun. I don't think that the author is simply giving us the time of day. I think there's something deeper going on here, as he describes the landscape.

I mean, Mary's whole world had ended when she saw Jesus, hanging on the tree. All of the dreams that she harbored of walking for a lifetime with him, of soaking up more of his teachings, and of watching the amazed faces as he healed the crowds that pressed upon him—all of that had ended. Nothing worked out as she had hoped. Her world became shrouded in night when the soldiers pierced his hands and feet, when they gashed his side with a sword, she knew that it was finished.

Mary had to have felt that night, down to her very core. The adrenaline from the death had drained out of her system, and all she was left with was that reality: her teacher had been killed, and she became utterly devoid of hope. And yet, she got up, with the other women while it was still dark. This is her last act of devotion. After the gruesome crucifixion, she gathers with a group of women to prepare the ointment for Jesus' body. And she leaves with that scent of the perfume lingering under her fingernails.

It was not just that the sun had not risen. It was not just Mary's crushing grief. But I also think that the darkness speaks of their position, as oppressed people. Perhaps Mary had even imagined that Jesus would be able to save the Jewish people from harsh dictates of Rome. Under the Roman rule, when they crucified a person, there was to be no acts of grieving. In fact, the punishment was that the mourner would also be crucified. And so, the women worked in defiance of Rome, even though they could have been killed for their acts of devotion. And yet, they still got up, under the shroud of night. No government could keep them from that body, from pulling off those hastily bound linens. No threats could keep them from packing the wounds with ointments and replacing the smell of death with the beauty of the spices.

I often wonder about this incredible act of devotion. What were they were going to do once they got there? I mean the stone was so large, there was no way that they could have rolled it away.

And guards watched the tomb. And even though there were so many obstacles, they still departed, while it was still dark.

The eleven men, the disciples, are still hiding behind locked doors, afraid for their lives. Judas is gathering rope and finding a tree, getting ready to hang himself. The silver coins in his pocket were not heavy enough to wipe out his guilt. The despair, the government, the physical barriers—it all created such darkness, and yet the women, they still got up.

I cannot lie to you this morning. We all read the headlines. This is a difficult Easter. We sing “Alleluia” in the midst of dire predictions. I have been in the grim habit of checking the case count to see how many people have contracted the corona virus. I look all the regions in which my families and loved ones live. I try to remember that each number in those massive totals is a life, so that I never dehumanize what is happening. And then it becomes too much. I feel the night overwhelming me.

I feel exhausted. Even though I’m not walking as much and I’m not exercising as much as I would normally, I feel the pull of night. As I talk to people, I know I’m not the only one. People complain of sleeping too much during the day and staying awake at night. They’re not able to get up in the morning. It is the darkness of having no hope, of feeling like there will be no joy contained in the day ahead of us.

On this Easter morning, we’re like the women, with the darkness of night surrounding us. The pandemic. The unemployment. The stock markets. The disparities in our health system that have become all too real. And yet, the story of Easter, the story of these women is that we must get up, even while it is still dark.

For Mary rose and she found a man who looked a lot like the gardener, but when he spoke her name, she knew exactly who he was. And as she held on to him and cried out, “Teacher!”, the gray shadows that surrounded them, became brilliant with color and light, the dawn came upon their dark world. And the truth of that moment has reverberated throughout 2,000 years. Through the resurrection, Christ has released us from the bondage of this world and has liberated us from sin and death. We have hope. Through Jesus Christ, we are new creations. Jesus became what we are so that we could become what he is.

I believe that is what the women are telling us this morning. They left in the night, while it was still dark. They left, when there was no hope. They left, feeling overcome by death. They left with the frustration that could not be with their loved one when he was dying. They left knowing that they could not bury Jesus properly. And yet they still got up, holding their jars of spices. And they found that his bandages had been removed, the stone had been rolled away, and he was victorious.

And we can hold fast to that belief ourselves. Because even though we might be feeling the weight of hopelessness, even though we are in the midst of a brutal time in our history, the promise of Easter that the sun will rise. The dawn is coming. And it is our job to follow those women, who were not paralyzed by fear, but overcome by hope. And even though they did not know exactly how it was going to work out, they put one foot in front of the other, they went to

that garden, and they learned that death did not have the final word. And in the same way, through the persistence of the medical professionals, the scientists, and the essential workers, we will see the dawn. Through the power of God who has claimed victory, death will not have the final word.

May we go out with that hope today. To the glory of God our Creator, God our Liberator, and God our Nurturer. Amen.