

Easter Sunday: Day of Resurrection  
April 12, 2020  
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Acts 10:34-43  
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24  
Colossians 3:1-4  
John 20:1-18

*Church closed due to COVID-19 (Coronavirus) pandemic: livestream available on Facebook and YouTube.*

The Washington Post invited nine Christian pastors and preachers to share some reflections this weekend. Their assignment: “Easter in a time of coronavirus.” The first of those preachers was our own Presiding Bishop Michael Curry. This is part of what he said:

I’m 67 years old. I’ve been in church somewhere on every Easter Sunday since birth. But this Easter doesn’t look or feel like Easter. No crosses adorned with flowers by children from Sunday School. No children dressed in new clothes for Easter Day. No crying babies packed next to their grandparents in the pews. Outside, it may look like spring, but inside the church, it looks like bleak winter.

On a Sunday a couple thousand years ago, it didn’t look like Easter, either. The stench of death was in the air. No lilies, no bunnies, no new clothes – just a brutal execution by the Empire of Rome of One who taught and lived love.<sup>1</sup>

It’s a point to ponder. Though this Easter Sunday is unlike any that any of us have ever known (or likely imagined), our Easter Sunday this year may – for that very reason – echo the stories of that first Easter Sunday, the stories we read in Scripture, including the story we just heard here this morning.

John describes a small gathering – less than the 10 maximum recommended by the CDC, just three: Mary Magdalene; and two other disciples (one named Peter; the other unnamed, but beloved). The rest of the disciples lived in isolation; they locked themselves in a home – out of fear for their safety, John says. They were unsure of their future, unable to imagine their lives ever returning to something like normal.

And if that sounds at all familiar, maybe it behooves us to listen again to that story of the first Easter.

Mary Magdalene is the first to go to the tomb that morning. It was early in the morning, so early that it was still dark, so dark that she could barely see when she got there. All she could see when she arrived was that the stone had been removed. And it at that time, it doesn’t occur to her that the stone being moved or an empty tomb inside ... that these might be hopeful signs.

She cannot see anything hopeful, not yet. And, in truth, she never even takes a look inside. She just assumes that someone has stolen Jesus’ body and runs off.

But note this right here at the start: though she didn't see or understand what was going on, it was already Easter.

Consider these lines from minister and artist and writer and poet Jan Richardson:

While it was still dark.  
While it was still night.  
While she could not see.  
While she thought death held sway.  
While she grieved.  
While she wept.  
While it was still dark, resurrection began.<sup>ii</sup>

She does not see it, but resurrection had begun!

So she runs to tell Peter and "the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved." She runs to tell them what she has seen – or, as we know, what she has failed to see. She tells them what she believes to have happened, that some "they" have come and taken Jesus' body out of the tomb.

And so they run to see for themselves. Of course, they never will see anything that will give them much in the way of comfort either. (Nor were they expecting to.)

The unnamed disciple gets there first, but he hesitates at the doorway. So Peter goes in first to see whatever there is left to see – which isn't much.

It occurs to me that the two of them see the same scene, but they see it differently.

It always sounds to me like Peter is approaching the scene like it's a mystery ("mystery" in the sense of an Agatha Christie novel). He's playing the part of a detective investigating a crime scene. He thinks he's there to investigate the disappearance of a body. He catalogues the evidence: the linens lying there, rolled up nice and neat; the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, rolled up, as well, but in a place by itself. But he cannot make sense of it; the clues do not allow for any conclusions.

The other disciple, the "one whom Jesus loved," he follows Peter, but he doesn't see it as a mystery to be solved. It seems to me that he enters into it differently. He enters into Mystery (with a capital M) ... into the "cloud of unknowing," into the place of death. In any event, he doesn't so much investigate the scene as enter into it. And without a word of explanation, John says, "he saw and believed."

But John never tells us what, exactly, did the other disciple come to believe. Maybe he comes to believe that a tomb cannot hold the author of life. Or maybe, as some suggest, he simply sees enough to believe that Mary was telling them the truth when she said that someone had taken the body of Jesus. Either way, it doesn't seem to change anything.

Without another word, the two of them return to their homes. One of them “believing” and the other still scratching his head ... they return to their homes.

“... and yet they did not understand the scripture, that [Jesus] must rise from the dead.”

Whatever conclusions either one of them reached – or fail to reach – they “did not understand” anything about resurrection; they are still in the dark.

And that brings us back to Mary. She had hoped that these men could have done something helpful. But they do nothing, at least nothing that helps her. And she is left standing alone, weeping. But make no mistake, it was already Easter:

While it was still dark.

While it was still night.

While she could not see.

While she thought death held sway.

While she grieved.

While she wept.

While it was still dark, resurrection began.

She does not see it, but resurrection had begun!

And it's only then that Mary bends down to take a look into the tomb for herself. And still she doesn't see clearly. Perhaps her eyes could not adjust from the bright morning sunshine to the darkness of the cave inside. More likely, she was blinded by grief and by tears.

But either way, when Mary looks inside and sees two angels, she doesn't seem to see them for who (or what) they are; she doesn't seem to understand what she's looking at. She certainly doesn't seem intimidated by these angels (the way most folks are in the Bible). These angels don't need to tell her, “Be not afraid. We bring you glad tidings!” They merely ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” and so she tells them what she's been telling everyone else, that someone has stolen Jesus' body ... and she wants to know where it is so she can go to reclaim it.

And then she turns around and comes face-to-face with Jesus. Not a dead body, but life itself.

And still she cannot see him, even when he's standing right in front of her. She supposes him to be the gardener. And now, blinded by grief that has turned to frustration, and frustration turned to anger, she all but accuses him:

*Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him ...*

A dead body is still better than no body. And though she is completely clueless still – and she doesn't see it – it was already Easter:

While it was still dark.  
While it was still night.  
While she could not see.  
While she thought death held sway.  
While she grieved.  
While she wept.  
  
While it was still dark, resurrection began.

She does not see it yet, but resurrection had begun!  
Resurrection had begun, and she does not see *him*.

But then, in a heartbeat, she does see him.

Jesus calls her name, and she replies, "Rabbouni!" – a name that is simultaneously full of tender affection and deep reverence. Jesus, her friend and her teacher, calls her by name. He hasn't abandoned her to death. She can trust that she isn't alone. And so she is brought to new life.

It's no small point: Mary is brought to new life, not merely given her old life back again.

Jesus tells her not to cling to him. She must have wanted to grab hold of him and never let him go. She must have wanted to hold on to him in the hopes that they could go back to the way they were before, back to a life where everything was familiar and safe and predictable.

But going back is not the plan, only forward. And life will never be the same again.

This Easter Sunday is unlike any that any of us have ever known (or likely imagined). But maybe it's more like that first Easter Sunday than we knew. So maybe there is something for us to ponder in that old, old story of resurrection.

I notice that Mary Magdalene is never chastised or criticized for stumbling in the dark, for failing to see clearly or understand what was going on, for being so focused on death that she fails to see life in front of her.

While it was still dark.  
While it was still night.  
While she could not see.  
While she thought death held sway.  
While she grieved.  
While she wept.  
  
While it was still dark, resurrection began.

... for her, as it does for us.

It's okay for us to stumble a bit, for us to fail to see or understand what's going on, for us to be distracted by all that frightens. Even if we are so preoccupied with death that we cannot see life when it appears right before us, it's okay.

But know this: Easter is now.

And resurrection has begun – whether we see it or not, whether we know it or not.

The Church's old proclamation still holds true (even now):

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Curry, "We Are Never Alone" @ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/10/we-are-never-alone/?arc404=true>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jan Richardson @ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2017/04/15/easter-sunday-while-it-was-still-dark/>.