

“Letting God In”

John 20:1-18

April 4, 2021

When I was a child, Easter morning always began in the dark. Easter began when my father quietly tapped on my bedroom door. “Pssst...*Chris! Do you still want to go?*” It seemed like I had shut my eyes just moments before; how could it already be time to get up? Easter began when my bare feet hit the cold wooden floor of my bedroom. We usually rode to the church in silence; there’s not much to say at that hour in the morning. We parked in the dark empty lot of Vandalia Presbyterian Church and made our way out to the lawn where, without speaking, we began moving metal folding chairs into position. Easter began for me in the darkness and quiet of that empty lawn before sunrise as human-shaped shadows began to speak in the whispers of pre-dawn.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, a woman walks to the graveyard. Of all the gospel writers, John is most clear about when Mary got up that morning. It was still dark. The sun had not yet risen to shed light on the situation at the tomb. It was still dark as Mary approached the final resting place of Jesus. And that darkness was more than physical. Mary was shadowed in grief, surrounded by the fog of painful loss, the gloom of faded hope. The humble teacher and powerful healer who had given her a reason to believe was gone. The bright light of his life extinguished on a Roman cross. Death had defeated him and, with him, the possibility of a radically new dawn. There was nothing to do but try to go on, go back, return to normal. Unable to sleep, she rose in the darkness and the quiet. She stood outside the tomb weeping, sobbing, grieving the unthinkable loss. Too dark. Too quiet.

We who worship on this bright and beautiful morning know what happens next. John gives us

all the information we need—it is the first day of the week. The day of resurrection. Life has already begun to stir in the darkness before sunrise. But Mary could not see it. Not in the dark. It was Easter, but she was still living in Good Friday. I think we know exactly what that means and how it feels. I think, at one level, this is why we gather this morning. We know all about Good Friday this year. We have seen enough of death to know its power. We have experienced enough suffering to know it is real. We need no refresher course on the truth of tragedy or the fact of human finitude. We know the graveyard. We too have gotten out of bed before sunrise overcome by a painfully unresolved past or an unshakable fear for the future. It’s three o’clock in the morning and you are frantically searching medical websites, not really wanting to read what you find there. It’s the middle of the night and you are replaying the scenes of an angry outburst you wish you could rewind and reverse. It’s way too early and you find yourself overcome by the absence of one whose life was knitted to yours. You lie awake at night worried about aging parents who can no longer care for themselves or children who can’t seem to find their way back home again. Uncertainty about your life’s purpose keeps you from restful sleep, or concern over the state of the world. You’re struggling to hold on to a relationship that has lost the fire that once warmed your heart, and you are wondering what the future looks like for you.

If you are living in the haze of darkness, those hours before dawn can be the longest and slowest of the day. We try our best to avoid them. We try meditation. We try medication. We change our diet or our routine. Last month I had my annual physical—okay, it had been five years—and after the

examination and inquiring about my sleep patterns, the doctor gently asked if perhaps I'd been under a lot of stress at work. We looked at each other above our masks and then we both laughed out loud. *Nine hours every night, how about you doc?* Stress swells in the dark, doesn't it? We fill our homes with artificial light that keeps the darkness away and noise machines that cover the uncomfortable silence. I remember when our son Samuel was two every single night when I flipped the switch to turn out the light in his nursery he would say, "uh-oh." Darkness can be hard to handle at any age.

And yet. The Gospel witness could not be clearer about this: darkness is the place where Easter begins. Only in the darkness can the first flicker of light be seen. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb, or Jesus in the tomb [new life] starts in the dark."ⁱ We can't do much in the darkness—our human limitations are made clear when the lights go out. But this day is about God's power, not our weakness. This is the day when we worship the God who shines the light of life in even the deepest darkness. This morning all we need to do is show up and let God in. Easter is encounter.

John tells his story in two parts. In part one, there is frenetic running back and forth. Mary discovers the stone has been moved and runs to tell Peter and John. Peter and John race each other to the tomb, discover that it is empty, then run back to their homes. There is a lot of action but not much understanding in this first section. No one says anything about resurrection—their concerns are more practical. The body of Jesus is missing and may have been stolen. First Century Jewish custom was to anoint the body for burial, but Jesus' death just before the Sabbath has interrupted the tradition. Mary is weeping with grief, fear, and exhaustion as she returns to the tomb a second time. Even the presence of two brightly attired angels cannot snap her out of the Friday funk. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

And then, the miraculous events that began

in the dark are finally illumined. Jesus is there. She thinks he is the gardener and asks him where the body is. I love that. Jesus is not glowing with resurrection light, he has no halo. No choir of angels surrounds him. As Frederick Buechner writes, "When the writers of the gospels come to the most important part of the story, they tell it in whispers."ⁱⁱ There in the garden, I like to imagine that Jesus whispers her name. "Pssst...Mary." And, in that moment, she knows. She just knows. Easter dawns. The light shines. The impossible has happened. Now, anything is possible.

Mary has missed so many signs of resurrection that morning—a stone rolled back, an empty tomb, angelic messengers, even Jesus himself. Who can blame her? It's still dark. Hard to see. But when she hears her name, everything changes for Mary. The message of resurrection did not come in an earth-shaking thunder; it was not written in the stars or shouted from the mountaintop. It came in a simple word whispered in truth and love—"Mary."

Isn't this what we all want? To hear our name spoken in truth and in love? Isn't this what gives us the courage to face those darkest hours? Knowing that we are not alone? Trusting that we are loved beyond measure?

If you have ever heard your name spoken with unconditional love, then you know what happened to Mary in the garden at sunrise on the first day of the week. This is the moment that Mary lets God in...and everything is suddenly radiant. This is the moment that her faith is formed, her life is changed, and she is made the first preacher of the Gospel. I have seen the Lord. An Easter sermon in five words. *I have seen the Lord.* But first I heard him speak my name.

And what about you? Have you heard your name? Have you seen the Lord? Because if you have, God's got some work for you to do. You see, the truth of Easter does not hinge on our intellectual assent to the theological doctrine of the bodily resurrection. This day does not depend on our attempts to explain

it. Easter is encounter. Encounter with the risen Lord who speaks our name in love. Encounters with fellow travelers created in the image of God. Too many still live in Good Friday gloom. Too many are cast aside, left behind, kept down, shoved out. Too many have relinquished what was left of faith, given up hope, fallen prey to cynical doomsday predictions of a world beyond redemption. If you have seen the Lord, you know better. If you have seen the Lord, you cannot be silent. If you have seen the Lord, if you have heard your name spoken in love, the voice of the One who claims you now calls you to a new way of life, a different level of commitment, a deeper degree of compassion.

There is something personal about Easter; there is something personal about hearing your name and opening the door to new life. There is something personal about letting God's love wash over you, about letting God in. We cannot love in the abstract. We can only love people with names and faces and stories. And that is how we are loved, not in theory, but by name. Not in general, but in relationship. Easter is encounter, and encounter alters everything.

All week long, I've been thinking about Lois Quist. Lois was a fifty-year member of the congregation I served in Atlanta, a woman of profound faith, the consummate church lady. If Lois was traveling and missed a Sunday service, a bulletin from the church she attended would appear in my mail slot as soon as she returned. Each year, on the day before Easter, Lois and her husband Ken would show up in our driveway with a buttercream frosted cake almost as big as Lois. If we were away, they'd leave the cake on top of our car. They did this year after year. Then, in the fall of 2016, Ken died after a short illness and Lois began to slow down. She missed Sundays and no bulletin appeared in my mail slot. Her health declined but her spirit stayed strong and about once a month a handwritten note would arrive in my mailbox. Easter of 2018 was one

of my final Sundays serving that congregation. Lois had been in the hospital but I knew she was back home and so I tried to call her the day before Easter. There was no answer at home. Later that afternoon I was in the backyard with Samuel when I heard a voice, clearly weakened but insistent nonetheless. "Psst...*Chris!*" I turned around to see Lois Quist. She motioned for me to come out to the driveway where her son was waiting in the car. She opened the backdoor and, yes, there was our Easter cake. Lois smiled: "I didn't want you to think I forgot what day it was." It was the last time I saw her. She died that October. But every year, on the day before Easter, I think of Lois, who knew that the resurrection of Jesus Christ called for celebration, who preached Easter sermons in cakes frosted with buttercream.

Today we proclaim the final defeat of death and all its corrosive effects on how we live. Today we announce the victory of God, the relentless promise of unending life. And maybe today you are prepared to encounter the Risen Christ, bake a cake, join the celebration.

But there is also a chance that this Easter Sunday is just another day drenched in darkness for you. Perhaps the promised new life has not yet whispered your name. If that is where you find yourself this morning, then I have good news for you. You are exactly where you are meant to be. Easter always begins in the dark. You have already done the only thing you need to do. You have shown up. You have put aside your reservations, your regrets, your shame, your cynicism, your fear.

Now, listen for the voice of love whispering your name. "Psst...*Mary.*"

Open your heart and let God in. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p. 129

ⁱⁱ Fredrick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, p. 252