

While It Was Still Dark  
John 20:1-18  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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As Krista reminded us, the story of the resurrection is one that all four gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - all of them tell. And while the details vary from gospel to gospel, in the same fashion that the details of our own stories vary from teller to teller, one of the things all four of the gospel writers note is that those who went to the tomb went early. The language varies a bit. For instance, in the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible - one says, "as the first day of the week was dawning"; another says, "very early"; another says, "at early dawn"; and John (the gospel from which we read today) says, "while it was still dark."

Yes, the language used is a little different, but still there are some common things communicated. It seems all four gospels tell us that they went as soon as they could. They didn't know what they would find. They certainly weren't expecting resurrection. But they knew they had to be near Jesus, even if that meant being near his tomb. And they couldn't wait any longer.

So, as soon as the day began, they went.

Now I have a particular affinity for John's language as he says, "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb..." (John 20:1a, NRSV).

*While it was still dark.*

I hear that and I can't help but think that John is commenting on more than just the time of day. Yes, as night fades into morning, it *is* still dark. But for those close to Jesus, there was a different shadow that was surrounding them. What they were experiencing wasn't just about waiting for the sun to rise and lighten the sky.

Rather, they were experiencing a darkness of the soul. They were experiencing the shadow that accompanies grief, the deep shadow that comes when grief doesn't stand alone but commingles with fear.

And, *while it was still dark*, not only in the atmosphere around them but in the deepest places inside them...while their grief was fresh...while their fear was palpable...while their desperation was overwhelming...in the midst of all of this, they came to the tomb.

And while we come to this day expecting to hear about resurrection. In fact, we come with that as a central expectation so much so that we forget to even be surprised by it. But, it is clear in scripture that those closest to Jesus did not make this early morning trek because they thought they would see him alive.

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No. They had seen him. They had seen him on the cross. They had seen him take his last breath. They knew he had died.

*And* they came to the tomb because even overwhelmed by the shadows around and within them, they could do nothing else.

So, I wonder about us. While in many ways, we have it all together. Most of us have more joy than sorrow. Even when that isn't our experience, we are good at appearing so, especially on the surface, especially in our social media posts. Yet, still the reality is that we, too, know what it is to live among the shadows, to experience the overwhelming darkness.

We know what it is to grieve.

We know what it is to fear.

We know what it is to feel desperate.

We know what it is to wonder if anything we do really matters.

We know what it is to lose hope.

And the Easter story reminds us that even while it is still dark in our lives, we are invited to draw near to God.

This isn't an invitation that requires us to deny our pain. This isn't an invitation that requires us to put on a happy face. This isn't an invitation that asks anything other than our presence.

But it is an invitation to not wait until everything is rosy, until our perfect social media posts are actually true, until we feel optimistic, before we sit in God's presence.

Because today - this resurrection celebration - it is a time to claim that we believe that even while it is still dark, within us or around us, God is at work.

This resurrection celebration is a time to claim that hope is worth hanging on to. That love is the right choice. That there is the possibility of new life each day, each moment.

This resurrection celebration is an opportunity for us to commit to live differently: to live as people who believe in resurrection, not only a historic resurrection of Jesus, but who believe in the possibility of new life today, in the possibility of better ways tomorrow, in the possibility of justice becoming reality, in the possibility of love winning in the end.

I wonder what it might look like if, even in the midst of hard realities, we found ways to hold on to hope, to believe the new life that just might be.

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John's telling of the resurrection ends with Mary going to the other disciples with the proclamation, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:18, NRSV). She didn't fully understand what had happened. She likely didn't have the language to explain it. Her grief was inevitably still living within her, even as hope nudged its way in after this resurrection encounter. The fear was still there - after all, you couldn't be in a Roman controlled Jerusalem and not feel fear. But, in this resurrection encounter, she discovered enough hope to go and make a difference in the lives of others. In this proclamation, "I have seen the Lord," she shared that hope with them.

I wonder, on this resurrection morning, if we might stop and notice the places we see the Lord.

Where is God showing up for you? Where are you invited to show up as one who shares God's light and love in this world?

Who is living in your life as the hands and feet of Jesus? Where are you invited to show up, to feed, to clothe, to care for, to share compassion in the spirit of Jesus?

Because the Easter celebration isn't just about looking back. But it is about looking around and looking ahead, about being willing to see the ways new life is springing up around and within and through us - yes, even us. It is about remaining committed to the way of love in order that others may know the presence of God, even while it is still dark. Amen.