

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Easter Sunday – Easter dawn song service
April 17, 2022
Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl
Easter clarity.

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. She saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² So she left and ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb,” she told them, “and we don’t know where they put him!”

³ So Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. ⁵ Bending over, he saw the linen cloths lying there, yet he did not go in.

⁶ Then Simon Peter, who was following him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ The cloth that had been on Jesus’ head was not lying with the linen cloths, but was folded up in a separate place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who arrived at the tomb first, also entered. He saw and believed. ⁹ (They still did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.)

¹⁰ Then the disciples went back to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood outside facing the tomb, weeping. As she wept, she bent over, looking into the tomb. ¹² She saw two angels in white clothes sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and one at the feet. ¹³ They asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She told them, “Because they have taken away my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.”

¹⁴ After she said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, though she did not know it was Jesus.

¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, “Sir, if you carried him off, tell me where you laid him, and I will get him.”

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary.”

She turned and replied in Aramaic, “*Rabboni!*” (which means, “Teacher”).

¹⁷ Jesus told her, “Do not continue to cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to my Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father—to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord!” She also told them the things he said to her.

—John 20:1-18

It was dark. The sun was not yet shining. The sun’s rays were not yet warming the air, nor did they give light. On that first Easter Sunday, John tells us that “**it was still dark**” when Mary Magdalene first came to Jesus’ tomb. But that description could also describe Mary’s heart. I imagine that Mary had great darkness deep in her soul that early Sunday morning. This was Mary of Magdala, identified by her home in the northern part of Galilee. Her entire life was changed because of Jesus. In Luke’s Gospel, he tells us that she had seven demons living inside of her. Seven demons. Such darkness she experienced. Seven demons made their home inside of Mary’s body. But all that changed when she met Jesus. Jesus healed her. He cast those seven demons out of her. And from that moment, her life changed. She became a follower of Jesus. She served him with full devotion and a heart full of faith in Jesus as the promised Savior.

But when the crucial hours of Jesus’ suffering and death came, so did the darkness. Not only was the sky over Calvary pitch black as she stood beneath Jesus’ cross on Friday, but darkness was also in her heart. Not only was the tomb in which they placed Jesus’ lifeless body devoid of light, but so was her soul. I can only imagine that hopelessness and despair that settled over her soul when they had buried Jesus. It was black as night in her heart. All her hopes in Jesus as the promised Savior were laid to rest when they sealed that tomb on Friday. How dark was her heart as she ran to Peter and John and sobbed, “**They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they put him!**” It was dark that Easter Sunday. Not just in the world, but in her heart. That’s why the tears came as she stood by his opened tomb. She thought that not only was her Savior dead but now even his body had been stolen. She would have loved one last labor of love. She would have loved one more glimmer of joy if she found his lifeless body still in that grave. She would have had one moment of happiness if she could have embalmed his body. So she “**stood outside facing the tomb, weeping.**” It was the only thing she could do. Everything seemed so hopeless, so devoid of life and light. Yes, she came “**while it was still dark,**” not only in the sky but in her soul as well.

Do you know that feeling? Are any of you still weeping as you stand with the memory of a loved one who has been placed in a grave? Do you feel darkness in your soul with all the things that are happening in the world? Are you upset with the way leaders are governing in our country? Have the events of the world brought such darkness into your soul? Are you struggling with life, getting tired of its burdens and weary of its weight? Are you worried about the economy and the future? Do you feel as though you are in a really dark place? Has this darkness penetrated into your heart and soul? Do you feel lost and you don’t know where to turn?

My friends, darkness must yield. Dawn must come. Every day it happens. This morning the sunrise was a 5:55 a.m. But you could see the indicators earlier than that. In the eastern sky, you see a faint light. The darkness gives way as a little light shines on the horizon. That's also how it was for Mary. As she first makes her way to that tomb, she saw a little light. The stone was rolled away. It certainly couldn't have been the disciples who moved that stone. Why would they have done that? They wouldn't have stolen his body. What would have been gained? If they stole the body and spread the story that Jesus rose from the dead, who would have believed their tale? Besides, the disciples were paralyzed with fear to plan such things. Certainly, the disciples were not the one who rolled that stone away. But neither were Jesus' enemies. They were the ones who wanted guards stationed by the tomb in the first place. They wanted a surveillance system in place. They wanted to have verifiable proof that Jesus' body was securely sealed in that tomb. Their goal was simple. Forget about Jesus. They wanted Jesus to remain dead so that people would forget about his claims. They wanted life to get back to normal without any news about Jesus of Nazareth. No, Jesus' enemies wouldn't have moved that stone away.

But there it was. When Mary came to the tomb, it was no longer blocking the path to Jesus' dead body. So for Mary to see **“that the stone had been taken away from the tomb”** was the *beginning* of some clarity. Easter light *was beginning* to shine in some darkened souls. Several of the women claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, though few believed their emotional report. They reported angels at the tomb, not only shining in glory but speaking the news that Jesus was no longer dead. Soon others like Peter and John and the Emmaus disciples breathlessly reported news so wonderful that it was almost unbelievable.

Have you ever experienced that? Have any of you ever walked away with joy in your heart from a message shared in church only to find some doubts later in the week? Jesus says that he is ruling over all things in this world, including all the governments. But do you believe it? Do you wonder? I hear the words from the Bible, but I don't always see the reality with my eyes. There are evil things going on in the world. Evil agendas and evil movements. Do you wonder if Jesus is really ruling? Sure, that's what it says in the Bible, but I'm not always too sure. It's too good to believe.

You wonder about your identity. Jesus says that you are an adopted, baptized child of God. But you gave into that sin, again. Maybe this time his back is turned. Maybe this time he won't forgive. Sure, he says that his love and forgiveness covers over the multitude of our sins, but I'm not always too sure. It's too good to believe.

In the dawn Mary had seen the stone rolled away and had run back to report her fears. Later, in the daylight, she had returned to the tomb to weep and tell the angels the same story. Then it happened! As she wept, she turned and noticed a man standing behind her. Through tear-dimmed eyes she didn't recognize him. But when he said, **“Mary,”** her heart turned over. **“Rabboni, teacher,”** she said in amazement. This was her Lord. She was not in error. She had seen them lay his body in the grave, and she recognized him now. With amazing suddenness, her tears were dried for her and the weight was lifted from her heart. All past sorrows were gone. Darkness had vanished. Everything was clear. My Savior lives!

What a day that had to be for Mary and the others! What a life-changing day that was. What wondrous truths Jesus' resurrection brought them! No more could sin's guilt hammer them. Christ had been delivered for their sins and raised again because of their justification. Yes, their guilt had been laid on him and crucified him, but his resurrection was proof positive that he had paid for all those sins. By raising his beloved Son, the Father had plainly shown Christ's payment was complete. No more could Satan accuse them because Christ on Calvary had crushed his head. The Savior had even descended into hell on that glorious Easter morning to lay the old, evil foe flat in the dust of defeat. No more could death hold them. Christ had entered his grave and exited to show that because he lives, they also would live. These wondrous truths, sealed by their Savior's resurrection, filled their days with glorious life, their lives of living for him, and their deaths ended in victory.

Do you know that feeling? I pray so. I pray that each of us here today can say, “Absolutely, Pastor. I see with Easter clarity. Not only do I know, I live it daily. The clarity of Easter lifts us above our daily battles and puts a spring into our step. The clarity of Jesus' resurrection brightens our darkest day and keeps the smile of faith on our lips. The clarity of Easter gives joy in our lives even when so much around us can make us gloomy and angry. The clarity of Jesus' resurrection shines down on our deathbeds and puts a light that cannot be extinguished into our graves. Because he lives, we also live. When life is confusing, let Easter help you out. I know that my Redeemer lives. That's Easter clarity. Amen.