



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Resurrection Life

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

March 23, 2008

Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

One of my favorite lines from John's Gospel comes in the very first chapter: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." But sometimes, when the darkness presses in, I wonder if John had it right, and I'm admitting to that fear on the easier side of Easter. I can only imagine what Mary Magdalene must have been thinking on her side of Easter.

John's Easter story begins, not surprisingly, in the darkness. Throughout his Gospel, there has been a tension between the darkness and the light, and if John wants us to learn deeply that the darkness will never overcome the light, the darkness created by the death of hope on Good Friday is a worthy adversary. Other Gospel writers may prefer the story to begin at first light, but John is not afraid to trust that even the darkest night will be shattered by resurrection light.

Mary Magdalene—alone—makes her way through that darkness in John's Gospel. While she has companions in other accounts, here she is painfully alone. Her solitude, at least for me, heightens the palpable grief that marks her journey to Jesus' grave.

As Mary Magdalene makes her way through the darkness of that first Easter morning, making her way to the tomb where the light of life has been sealed away, she surely would have argued with John. The darkness hadn't simply overcome the light; it had consumed it. The light that John tells us is life had gone out, and Mary's world is still spinning out of control.

As Easter has approached this year, one image has kept popping into my mind. It was an image that I saw first-hand near the end of one of our Christmas Eve services. We had already shared the familiar story of how the people who lived in the land of deep darkness were given the light that no darkness would ever overcome; we had feasted on grace at the table of our Lord; and now we were engaged in that pinnacle moment of sentimentality—or is it mystery—when we passed the light of Christ from one candle to another. As many of you probably know, we always form a circle around the edges of the sanctuary and it is amazing to watch the darkness fade away as the light shines. I can still remember back to that night just three short months ago. I remember thinking to myself, "John had it right. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."

But soon my fear that John had it wrong returned. As is typical at such services, about five folks stayed in their seats. From where I stood, I began to wonder whether or not I should take my light to them. Those of you who know me well know that I created a whole litany of back-stories as to why they weren't joining the circle. Perhaps one would have difficulty standing or holding a candle; another was possibly just too despairing to join in; still another may have wanted to see what it looked like from a different vantage point. I thought about these things as I stood there, holding my candle against the dark-

ness and wondering whether or not to make the walk toward those still sitting in darkness.

Thankfully, someone else was a step ahead of me. I watched as one of our members, holding her candle, walked confidently toward one man sitting near the aisle where she stood. I watched as she offered to light his candle, which he refused.

I watched as she started to hand him her own light, which he also refused.

And then I—along with a couple hundred others—watched as the man who sat in the land of deep darkness blew out the light that upon him shined.

What else could she do? Our fellow church member turned, and without the confidence that had marked her journey there, slowly made her way back to those of us still walking (or at least standing) in the light of the Lord.

I still don't know the whole story of what was going on that night. It could be that what I saw wasn't what actually happened in that darkened sanctuary. But I can tell you that image has hounded me as Easter drew near this year. I say it hounded me because things keep happening that cause that nagging fear that John was somehow wrong about the darkness and the light to gain strength within me. And I've talked with enough of you in classrooms or coffee shops or hospital rooms to know that I'm not alone in that fear.

Things keep happening that seem to undo Easter—things like a war on terror that will have no end; things like the approaching death of someone we love; things like Alzheimer's robbing those we care about of their memory. Everywhere we turn, it seems, things which defy God's righteousness and love—things which make a mockery of John's words about the light shining in the darkness—stalk us to the point that we grow weary, and our steps grow slow, and we find that we are walking through the darkness on the way to God knows what, and Mary Magdalene holds our hands.

If we have refused to be anesthetized or deluded by cultural indifference or a false bravado, we who entered the sanctuary on this Easter morning need some good news. And John's account of the resurrection offers us just that, but it will not do so easily or carelessly. Before John will let us run forth from the empty tomb into the new world of resurrection life, he will insist that we stand in the darkness, stare into the emptiness of the tomb, and weep with Mary about all that assails the wholeness God intends for this world. And then, only then, will John allow us to turn away and to cast our eyes toward the One who calls us by name, bidding us to enter a world teeming with resurrection life.

And so, on this glorious Easter morning, we are joining with Christians around the world to shout the good news: Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We've been making plans for weeks now, perhaps months, and there has been little doubt that we would usher in this morning with unequalled joy.

It was not so for Mary so many years ago. John's description of Mary's slow march to the tomb stands in stark contrast to our Easter journey. With heavy steps, Mary Magdalene stumbled through the darkness on her way to Jesus' tomb. The darkness of her spirit was mirrored in the darkness of the night, and she was swept along only by the grief that moves us toward the graves of those we love.

As she trudged along, Mary seemed to be carrying the weight of the world on her shoulders, which, in a way I guess, she was. She had watched the one she and the others had committed their lives to be crushed on the Cross. She and the other disciples had in-

vested their whole lives in what appeared now to be nothing more than a cruel joke. Mary had watched as Jesus died on the cross and as his body was placed in the grave. When they had sealed the tomb of Jesus that day, they had done more than seal away his body. They had also buried their own hopes and dreams. One preacher described it as “the night of the end of human hope.”

Though we don’t have the precise details of how they spent that day after Jesus’ death, we do know that they weren’t planning their Easter luncheons. Unlike us on this side of Easter who know that Saturday is the day before the great day of God’s action to deliver us, Saturday for Mary and the other disciples was the day after the worst that could have happened. As Saturday dawned, it seemed to mark the crowning of the old order, as if everything that plagued human life had somehow prevailed. All that they had hoped for had come crashing down on that terrible Friday, and that long Saturday when nothing seemed to be happening only confirmed their deepest fears. When “the night of the end of human hope” finally ended, the disciples woke to a world that seemed void of everything they hoped that God was up to in Jesus Christ. Hate still seemed stronger than love; despair was far more real than hope; and death seemed to have silenced life forever.

It is this hopeless Mary who stumbles through the darkness toward the tomb. Whatever else she was looking for in that early morning darkness, it wasn’t resurrection.

So when she arrived at the tomb and found it empty, Mary’s mind didn’t leap toward resurrection at all, but theft. “Someone’s taken the body away,” she thought. All that she had left was a dead body, and now even that had been taken away—God knows where—and Mary’s heart simply broke.

So she ran and brought the others back with her, but once they had satisfied themselves that what she said was true, they left her there weeping. She was anchored to the tomb, as if tethered by the weight of the world.

Mary, eyes blurred by her tears, peers through the darkness into the emptiness of the tomb. What she sees there, I think, is not just an empty space but a vision of the emptiness of the old world.

What Mary sees is an old world where hope is mocked. She sees a world where peace has little chance. She sees a world where the rich get richer and the weak keep on suffering. She sees a world where the word “cancer” is spoken far too often. She sees a world where enemies remain enemies, where families are ripped apart by conflict, where children go hungry. She sees a world in which war drags on and peace eludes. She sees a world where race, and color, and religion collide. But most of all, she sees a world where the dead stay dead.

Do you know what it’s like to stand with Mary and look through tear-stained eyes at that world? Of course you do. We’ve been there, haven’t we, staring into the face of all that haunts us? We have felt the dull ache of those wracked by grief, of those overcome by fear that nothing will ever change. We know what it’s like to scream for things to be different and to hope against hope, only to have our hopes smashed. What Mary sees in the emptiness of the tomb is the emptiness of the old world wracked by death and suffering and pain, and where our tears flow far too often. Every now and then, something tragic happens in the world or own lives to bring it into sharper focus for us, but it’s there

all the time. The old world torments us, and it is filled with anything and everything that defies God's righteousness and love.

Mary was right to weep at such a world, and so are we. But the news we proclaim today is that the old world is passing away, and by the power of the resurrection, everything is made new. As long as Mary peers into the tomb, she will miss the risen Lord. But, John tells us, when she finally turns away from the tomb, she stares directly into the face of resurrection life.

That's where this story turns, when John tells us that Mary turns from that tomb, when she stops staring into the old world and stares straight into the face of the new. In her turning, Mary moves from the old world into the new world where resurrection courses through its veins. She hears the voice of the Risen Christ calling her by name and suddenly she's cast into a new world filled with resurrection and life, a world in which nothing is nailed down, a world where possibilities abound.

Since that first Easter day, you and I and countless others have been walking about in a world teeming with resurrection. Though at times circumstances cause us to forget, we live in a world into which the life of God has been poured. In the resurrection of Christ, God brings the whole world to newness and to life. Easter is a day to celebrate the hope which is sung from of old, the hope that one day God will wipe away all the tears from all the eyes, and death and dying and pain shall be no more.

Here in this sanctuary this morning, we gather around the powerful story when the curtain rises on the new world that God has promised and shows us in the resurrection of Jesus. But, just as Mary cannot stand silently by the tomb, neither can we remain here. We are sent—always sent by God—into this world that is alive with resurrection, and we are invited to make the Risen Christ known. Your life and my life—our life together—will be a testimony that Christ is alive as we make Jesus the very center of our living.

And so, God now sends us into this world, and we dare not forget the truth: that this world is filled with the power of resurrection, and God is making all things new. But if we spend all our time peering into the empty tomb, we will miss the risen Lord who is out there somewhere calling us by name.

In just a moment, we will gather around the font with Brad and Angie and Jamison as they bring Barrett for baptism. In his baptism, Barrett will be sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. And this is the truth which we will share with him as he continues to grow day by day—it's the truth Paul affirms in Romans:

*When we were baptized in Christ Jesus,
we were baptized into his death.
We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death,
so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father,
we too might live a new life.
For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his,
we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.*

Today, as we celebrate that truth for one child of God—for Barrett—all of us get a chance to overhear God calling us by name and leading us into resurrection life.