

While It Was Still Dark
John 20.1-18
March 27, 2016
Easter 1C
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St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Christ as a Gardener by Andrew Hudgins

The boxwoods planted in the park spell LIVE.
I never noticed it until they died.
Before, the entwined green had smudged the word
unreadable. And when they take their own advice
again—come spring, come Easter—no one will know
a word is buried in the leaves. I love the way
that Mary thought her resurrected Lord
a gardener. It wasn't just the broad-brimmed hat
and muddy robe that fooled her: he was *that* changed.
He look across the unturned field, the riot
Of unscythed grass, the smattering of wildflowers.
Before he can stop himself, he's on his knees.
He roots up stubborn weeds, pinches the suckers,
deciding order here—what lives, what dies,
and how. But it goes deeper even than that.

His hands burn and his bare feet smolder. He longs
To lie down inside the long, dew-moist furrows
and press his pierced side and his broken forehead
into the dirt. But he's already done it—
passed through one death and out the other side.
He laughs. He kicks his bright spade in the earth
and turns it over. Spring flashes by, then harvest.
Beneath his feet, seeds dance into the air.
They rise, and he, not noticing, ascends
on midair steppingstones of dandelion,
of milkweed, thistle, cattail, and goldenrod.

Reading of John 20.1-18

Mark has three: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome.
Luke tells of “Mary Magdalene and Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them.”¹
Matthew has two Marys.
But John has just this one.

It’s not surprising that all four gospels have women heading to the grave first. I think of the women of my family who, for generations, have risen before dawn to care for the world around them. I think of my great-grandmother who tragically found herself a single mother of seven children on a farm in Fayette, Alabama. Decades after her death, her children would still tell stories of her selflessness and hard work, rising early to tend to the needs of the day.

Each gospel’s story bears surprises, to be sure, but like Jesus’ parables that take an expected ending and flip the outcome to teach a lesson, these resurrection encounters take the ordinariness of women’s work and make testifiers and evangelists and preachers out of each and everyone. They are mothers and sisters and friends, women of honorable upbringing and of rumored ill-repute. The gospel word is on their lips each and every Easter proclaiming even today, “I have seen the Lord!” Resurrection upends and surprises, makes all things new, changes the world as we know it. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

The synoptic gospels report scenes beginning at dawn, as the Sabbath has ended and a new week barely begun, with the early sunlight guiding the women’s path to the tomb. But John sets the scene while it was still dark. Before the guiding presence of the sun, while everything was still quite uncertain, while the life who was the light of all humankind had fully been snuffed out, Mary Magdalene goes to find Jesus.

Mary Magdalene should have been too afraid to go. Everyone who had any association and any sense of self preservation was still in hiding. Peter had already denied any knowledge of who Jesus was before he was executed as a threat to the state. Naturally, his followers were scattering. The most foolish thing was to go to the place where he was buried.

But while it was still dark, she set out. And while it was still dark, something had already happened. While it was still dark, the stone had moved. While it was still dark, God had been at work. While it was still dark, she saw that things were not as they should be—or, at least, not as she expected them to be. And before she could make any sense at

¹ Luke 24.10

all of what was happening, while it was still dark, she ran. She ran through the garden, away from that rolled-away-stone, straight to Simon Peter and toward the only logical conclusion she could grab at that early hour: his body was stolen. She wouldn't even be able to see him and touch him and whisper words of love over him one last time.

And so while it was still dark, they *all* started running toward the dangerous place, against common sense, each one moving at a different pace in search of different signs or clues. They ran straight away to the place that might endanger them all, through the garden that once held the body of their beloved friend, away from their fears and toward neatly wrapped cloths and emptiness and a new story.

Before the sun has risen, before the friends begin to put the details together, let's pause right here in front of this hectic scene in the final hours of night when everything has changed forever but no one yet knows what God has done. The gospel text this Easter speaks to the world in which we live. Easter has come, we have pushed through the long weeks of Lent, and yet there is much that is so dark.

The news from Turkey and Belgium and Iraq of deadly violence.

Reports on climate change and the warming, rising seas that will impact everything and everyone.

A political climate that pits neighbor against neighbor in a scramble for power.

Great poverty and inequality right here in this city we love.

The grief that lingers in our hearts and minds and is not abated by time.

Our fears and our flaws whispered to us by our minds like a record stuck on a groove.

The darkness within that surprises and shocks, taking us by surprise in our anger and lust and foolishness.

The dark shadows of our own hearts, our hidden selves, the secrets we dare not reveal to anyone.

We know the place that resurrection has not yet changed. We know the feeling in the pit of our stomach that something is not right and the powerlessness to change that reality. We know darkness.

And so how extraordinary that Mary runs into that place not once but twice. And after the friends have come and gone, it is in that garden, in that darkness, that Mary stands weeping before angels without fear. And in that darkness, she hears a man call her name, though she cannot see him through her tears. The late Baptist preacher Dr. Bill Self notes, "She sees the object of her concern, but does not recognize him. Jesus comes to her with great love and gentleness." In this scene, "We need to realize that in our most difficult situations God is working on our behalf even if we do not know it at

the time. [God] is working to bring light and to dispel our dark situations. The good news is not only that Jesus was raised from the tomb, but the character of God is revealed in Jesus. [God] is light and [God] is also love.”²

Professor Lucy Lind Hogan compares John’s resurrection account to the creation of all things in Genesis 1; something a lot like an 8th day of creation. Again, it is no small detail that “John’s tale begins in the dark, the absence of light. This is the writer who, at the opening of his gospel took us not to a stable, but to the very opening of creation, ‘In the beginning.’ Could it be that John is taking us back, once more, to that primordial darkness when ‘the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep’ (Genesis 1:2). The author is echoing Paul’s declaration that in the death and resurrection of Jesus we are experiencing a new creation, ‘everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!’ (2 Corinthians 5:17)”³

It is in the darkness of our world and darkness of our beings that we most desperately need the good news of God. Though we cannot yet see the way forward, though we do not know what is happening around us, though reason and instinct tell us to hide and save ourselves, God is already at work. God is steadily and forever at work making all things new, making life from death.

On Thursday night, Christians around the world gathered in houses of worship to read from John chapter 13, the night that Jesus washed his disciples’ feet, broke bread with them. Knowing fully what was to come in the days ahead, knowing he would be betrayed by one in that room, Jesus still gave them the mandate—a final command—to love one another. We spoke these words and then dipped our hands into a basin of water and remembered this act of love while across the world Pope Francis led a service washing and kissing the feet of 12 men and women.⁴

The Washington Post reported, “In a center for asylum seekers outside Rome,” “[eight men and four women] came from Mali, Eritrea, Syria and Pakistan. They were Muslim, Hindu, Catholic and Coptic Christians. And one by one, Pope Francis knelt down before these migrants on Holy Thursday and washed their feet.”

² http://day1.org/4649-while_it_was_still_dark

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1236

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/03/25/children-of-the-same-god-pope-francis-washes-the-feet-of-muslim-migrants/>

Onlookers noticed, "A number of the migrants whose feet were washed by the pope had tears streaming down their faces." Then Pope Francis spoke the words, "'We are different, we are different, we have different cultures and religions, but we are brothers [and sisters] and we want to live in peace.'"

As our deacon-of-the-week Karen Babin put it in an email about headlines of goodness and light this weekend, "In this time of disturbing news from around the world, and on the political front, ENJOY this 'GOOD NEWS'!! HOPE LIVES - kindness prevails!!!!"

Pope Francis' actions of affection show simple but powerful ways to live in the resurrection light while it is still dark. It is easy for us to wring our hands and lament how a crisis is too big to be solved. What possibly can one person do? But while it is still dark, Francis reached out in love and peace to bless and touch and kiss the feet of those who have wandered so far from home.

It's what Mary wanted to do. She wanted to find Jesus one more time, bless his body one more time, make sure he was properly prepared in his resting place. Surely if she went while it was still dark, she could have that private moment alone. Not have to worry about the raw sounds of her weeping or tending to the needs of anyone else around her. Then she realized he wasn't there but was alive—yet not the same. And she reached for him as any of us would, went to grab him and hold him and make sure he never left her again.

Instead she hears, "'*Noli me tangere*,' [NO-lee may TAN-juh-ray]... "Touch me not. Don't hold on to me" (John 20:17), thus making her," writes Frederick Buechner, "not only the first person in the world to have her heart stop beating for a second to find him alive again when she'd thought he was dead as a doornail, but the first person also to have her heart break a little to realize that he couldn't be touched anymore, wasn't there anymore as a hand to hold on to when the going got tough, a shoulder to weep on, because the life in him was no longer a life she could know by touching it, with her here and him there, but a life she could know only by living it: with her here—...old broken-heart and last, best friend—and with him here too, alive inside her life, to raise her up also out of the wreckage of all that was wrecked in her and dead.

In the meanwhile, he had much to do and far to go, he said, and so did she, and the first thing she did was go back to the disciples to report. 'I have seen the Lord,' she said, and whatever dark doubts they might have had on the subject earlier, one look at her face was enough to melt them all away like morning mist."⁵

⁵ Frederick Buechner, *Whistling in the Dark*, "Mary Magdalene"

On this rainy Easter morning, in the quiet of this moment and the sacredness of this space, we acknowledge the great darkness that permeates the light of this day. And we affirm that we are children of the light and not of the dark. We proclaim that God's light shines in all the dark places, and God is already at work before we even realize what is going on right before our eyes. We will not be cynics and skeptics. We will not be dismayed or discouraged when the news is bad and the prognosis looks bleak. We will wash the feet and bless the stranger and welcome the weary with a kiss. We will bear light because God is light. We will bear love because God is love. We will remind each other, "I have seen the Lord."

Amen? Amen.