

# In the Dark

**TEXT:**  
**John 20:1-18**

**March 23, 2008 – Easter Sunday**

**T**here is a slight chill in the air this morning; it feels a lot more like winter than spring. Usually our winter coats are placed in the back of the closet for a couple of weeks before Easter arrives, but not this year. Easter seems awful early this year doesn't it? Where are the flowering blooms? Where are the warm sunny days? Doesn't Easter usually come after March Madness? Weren't we just here for Christmas?

It is true, this year Easter has arrived as early as it can during our life time. The last time it fell on March 23, Woodrow Wilson had just been inaugurated as the 28<sup>th</sup> President. (1913) And it will not fall on this date again for more than 100 years. But, believe it or not, Easter can come even earlier. March 22 is the earliest it can happen, but the last time that happened, Native Americans roamed the plains of what would become the State of Kansas. (1818)

Maybe we are not ready for Easter this year. Easter seems so unexpected, so sudden, so early. And perhaps that is the point in this year's Easter message: Easter is unexpected this year ... or any year.

We gather here again this year to hear the story. Each of the gospels comes to an abrupt climax with a short account of a few of the followers of Jesus who went to the place where Jesus had been buried early in

the morning. They did not expect to find the tomb empty. Someone, (an angel according to Matthew, but a young man in Mark's Gospel), tells them that Jesus is no longer in the grave. The disciples wander off, somewhat dazed, not quite knowing what to think about this.

John's Gospel gives us the longest account of Easter morning. The 18 verses we have just read is the entire story. Three disciples went to the tomb expecting nothing out of the ordinary. Mary went to the tomb in sorrow and grief. Peter and the Beloved Disciple ran to the grave expecting nothing more than heart-break and shattering disappointment. An empty tomb was inconceivable. Resurrection was not in the realm of possibility. Easter was not expected.

There is a small detail in John's account that is different than the other gospels. John tells us that Mary went to the tomb while it was still dark. The other gospels tell us that the women arrived at dawn or early in the morning. But John said, "Early on the first day, while it was still dark, Mary went to the tomb." (John 20:1) Why this difference? Why does John add this little detail about Mary going to the tomb in the dark?

Before trying to answer that question, I need to tell you two things about John's gospel. First, John was the last of the accounts of Jesus to be written.

The author wrote his gospel several decades after the others, perhaps some 50 or 60 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. The basic story line of Jesus had become known in the fledgling Christian community at the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. So John wrote his gospel with a distinct purpose in mind. He wanted his readers to believe in Jesus. Matthew, Mark and Luke wrote more conventional history; this is what Jesus did, and this is what happened, and this is how the people responded. John took some of those stories and added a bit of theology, as if to say, and this is what the story meant. Let me give you an example: All four gospels tell the story of when Jesus feed the crowd of 5000 with a few pieces of bread and some fish. It is in John's gospel, however, that we get a very long discussion about how this miracle points to Jesus as the Bread of Life.<sup>1</sup>

The second thing about John's gospel I want to point out is that it is the gospel of light. John talks a lot about light. There are more than 20 references to Jesus being the light spaced throughout the text. In the first paragraph, John tells us that Jesus is the light that overcomes darkness and that Jesus was the light to all people. (John 1:4, 5) Later, he speaks of Jesus being the light of the world, (8:12) and then calls his followers to be children of the light. (12:36)

So it is curious, is it not, that the account of Easter morning in John's Gospel begins in

darkness. It is dark when there is no light. In effect, darkness is the default position of life without the presence of the Holy One. The Bible affirms, again and again, that it is God who brings light into darkness. This is the point made in the creation story from the first chapter of Genesis: darkness covered the face of the deep and God said, "Let there be light." It is out of the darkness that God brought creation into being.

When it is dark, it is hard to tell what is coming up next, or what is around the bend, or over the next hill. When we say someone is in the dark, it means they are without knowledge, or they don't know the details. When someone experiences the dark night of the soul, there is only despair and hopelessness. For John, darkness means life without Christ.

That is where the Easter story begins. It begins in a world without light. It begins in a world without the love, tenderness, strength, teaching and grace of Jesus Christ. It begins in a world of darkness, despair and hopelessness. When Jesus died, the gospels tell us, "Darkness came over the whole land." (Luke 23:44)

Mary went to the gravesite in the dark. What a powerful image of what it is like when we first try to comprehend the mystery of the resurrection. Resurrection does not make sense. Resurrection is not the way life is supposed to work. One does not die, get buried for three days and then come back to life. Nothing in science prepares us to understand the words, "He is risen." Nothing in our historical perspective prepares us to grasp the meaning of the empty tomb.

Easter is so, well, unexpected. The whole idea leaves us a little in the dark.

But when Mary came to the site where Jesus was buried, she found something troubling, something disturbing. The stone which covered the grave had been rolled away. This was not what she had expected. She ran to where the followers of Jesus had gathered. She told Peter and the Beloved Disciples about the opening at the grave. The two men raced back to the tomb. They did not find the body. They did not find an answer to the question which perplexed their mind: what had happened to Jesus? They left that place confused, for as the writer for the story tells us, "they as yet did not understand the scripture, that Jesus must rise from the dead." (John 20:9)

That is the beginning of the story, that where the story of Easter begins, not in bold affirmation but in confusion, in uncertainty, in the dark. Meanwhile, we sing our hymns, come forward to pick up our Easter Lilly, and head off to brunch, not quite sure what to think about this, just like the disciples.

But the proclamation of the church is clear: When the world was in the dark, the light of Christ's resurrection came, bringing hope, renewal and life to the world and to us.

When we look around, where do we see our world in the grip of darkness? We see it in the hunger, poverty and ethnic violence of Africa; we see it in the ceaseless campaign of power leading to war and the destruction of life; we see it in our lack of stewardship of the

earth's resources, resulting in the polluting of the water, air and land on which we depend for life; we see it in the warming of the climate that effects the level of the water, the cycle of the seasons and the crops of the field.

And in our own lives, where does the darkness grip our souls? It is at that point when the marriage reaches the stage of crisis; when our health or the health of a loved one falters; when the economy turns bad and our home or our job or our health care lies in jeopardy; when we are unsure where to turn to or whom to trust for real answers to life's perplexing problems.

Again, the proclamation of the church is clear: When the world was in the dark, the light of Christ's resurrection came, shattering the darkness, bringing hope, renewal, life and light to the world and to our lives.

In the first of the Lord of the Rings movie, the hero-travelers gather at Lothlorien where the legend and mystery of the rings are revealed. As Frodo and his companions begin their journey to battle the power of evil, Galadriel, the most noble of the elves, gives each of them a gift. To Frodo, the one on whom the burden of the task rest most, she said,

*I give you the light of Eärendil, our most beloved star. May it be a light for you in dark places, when all other lights go out.*<sup>ii</sup>

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus Christ is the Light of the world; that is truly unexpected good news for us when we live in the dark.

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<sup>i</sup> John 6:1-15 tells of the miracle of the feeding of the 5000. John 6:22-71 offers the theological reflection on the event.

<sup>ii</sup> From *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001)

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