

While It Was Still Dark

John 20:1-18

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Six years ago, on the Monday of Holy Week, the world watched as the roof and the spire of Notre Dame Cathedral collapsed, swallowed by the flames of a devastating fire. Even those of us who aren't Catholic, even those who had never seen Notre Dame, even those who had little interest in architecture or sacred relics, were filled with grief to see this icon of Christian faith in flames - grief and an eerie sense that we were watching the destruction of something precious, something holy, as if in some way the evil in the world was destroying the good.

That image of Notre Dame in flames inspired my Easter sermon that year. Some of you may remember that six years ago, Easter fell on the tail of our denomination's painful General Conference concerning the place of LGBTQ+ individuals in United Methodism. As a result, many of us in this church were distraught as the denomination we loved seemed to be burning in the flames of intolerance and hatefulness. As with Notre Dame, it felt as though something precious was collapsing right in front of us. So, when Easter came, I tried to address some of our grief and frustration, hurt and anxiety with a sermon entitled "While It Was Still Dark".

Now, six years later, I think we are again living in a time when many of the institutions and principles we have valued seem to be in flames. As I talk with people in our congregation about how the events of recent months are impacting them, I see in my mind's eye the fallen buttresses of Notre Dame. So, I decided to do something I almost never do - bring back a sermon title I've used before. Consider this a "While It Was Still Dark" reprise.

In the Gospel of John, we pick up the Easter story with Mary Magdalene. Mary had travelled with Jesus and listened as he taught about kindness and compassion, love and justice. She had witnessed his acceptance of outcasts and his healing of the sick. She was there as the crowds cheered for him on Palm Sunday and as they cried out to crucify him just a few days later. She watched him carry the heavy, wooden cross on his way to Golgotha. And she cried at his crucifixion, heartbroken to see his agony as his life slipped away.

Imagine the loss she must have felt. He had saved her heart and spirit by driving out seven demons that had long crippled her. Then he welcomed her, a woman, as an equal to the twelve disciples, worthy of his teaching. He treated her with respect and compassion – and planted seeds of hope in her and so many others, saying that God believed in them, in their right to live in freedom and justice – out from under the oppressive hand of the Roman Empire. She believed that he could change their world, lead them to fulfill God's vision for humanity, a vision of inclusiveness, justice and love.

Then in less than twenty-four hours, he was gone. Humiliated, whipped, and crucified. Her teacher - both precious and holy – died hanging on a cross like a common criminal. She was devastated. So, early on the third morning, while it was still dark, Mary got up, dressed herself, and slipped away to visit the tomb, her heart heavy with grief.

I think this is where many of us find ourselves this year. We are journeying in the dark as Mary does, overcome with anxiety, anger, grief, or fear. For some of us, the darkness has fallen recently with the loss of a job, the end of DEI initiatives, deportations, attacks on trans folks, the sudden loss of retirement savings, the end of aid to those Jesus calls us to help. For others, the darkness came with the death of someone we love, or with a divorce, an illness or depression, guilt over a mistake we've made, grief over a relationship we've lost, addiction to drugs, alcohol, or sex. Whatever has broken us, we stand, like Mary at the tomb, weeping in the dark.

While it was still dark, Mary climbed her way to the place where he had been buried. While it was still dark, Mary held her hand to her chest trying to release the ache that grief creates. And while it was still dark, she lifted her eyes and found an empty tomb. Because while it was still dark, God was creating a miracle - a messy, beautiful, joyous, astounding miracle.

And, of course, that is the Easter message for us, as well. We may see only darkness, but while it is still dark, God is already at work. While it is still dark, God is healing our broken hearts. While it is still dark, God is planting seeds of hope and justice. While it is still dark, God is resurrecting and recreating, nourishing and nurturing, so something new can be born. In our hearts, in our lives, in our world. "It happens to all of us," Nadia Bolz-Weber tells us. "God simply keeps reaching down into the dirt of humanity and resurrecting us from the graves we dig for ourselves through our violence, our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance, and our addictions. And God keeps loving us back to life over and over."

When we feel threatened, when we lose someone we love, when our health fails, when our relationship with a family member or friend gets broken, when society disappoints or disturbs us, God loves us back to life. God is in the promise that death, injustice, and brokenness are not the end of the story. God is eternally in the movement of good, in the arc of justice, in the light that overcomes darkness, in the strength and power of love to heal and resurrect us.

That is what Easter is all about. We are Easter people because we know God isn't finished yet - God will continue to create new life, new hope, new beginnings, new light in the darkness.

Even after she sees the empty tomb, it takes a while before Mary realizes what is happening and recognizes Jesus standing with her. Once she finally does, she must want with all her heart to hold onto him, to keep him there with her, to take him to the other disciples, to simply be with him. Yet, he says, "No. Do not hold onto me". Scholar Gregory Robbins explains this saying, "Her story and his, his experience and hers, cannot be anchored in the past. Nor is it theirs alone. Instead, he calls her by name to announce to the disciples - and, by extension to all who would believe - a new creation, an unimaginable future."

Sometimes, we look for healing and hope by holding onto the past, trying to impose our expectations or desires on an ever-changing world. We sit day after day by the grave of our loved one. We revert to being kids again when with our parents or struggle as parents to let our children grow up. We address the same challenges with the same solutions. We long for how things were before.

Yet, what Jesus tells Mary is she can't hold onto him. Rather, he calls on her to move forward, to share the story, the joy, the hope, the promise that is resurrection. She will be the witness to what God is doing. She and the other disciples will carry the promise of new creation out into the broken world.

And, of course, he calls on us to do the same. As faithful followers of Christ, our call is not to dwell in the past but to carry the light that is God out into the darkness. We each have a vital role to play in being agents of God's love, voices for justice, purveyors of peace, people who live our daily lives according to what Jesus taught. Love one another as I love you. That is our work to do not just in word but in action. That is our calling as Easter people in a broken, unjust, and suffering world.

Sometimes, when it is still so dark, it is hard to believe that what we do can make a difference. And then God shows us that it does. After that devastating General Conference of 2019, faithful United Methodists across the country spoke out, saying they could not support a denomination that didn't welcome all God's people. Three years later, the most conservative churches in United Methodism split off to create their own denomination and now we, as United Methodists, are taking our first baby steps into understanding what full inclusion of LGBTQ+ folks looks like.

Similarly, after Notre Dame burned, people around the world donated millions of dollars for its restoration. Artisans volunteered their time to recreate its beauty. We all waited with bated breath to see if the stunning cathedral could ever reclaim her former beauty. And then, four months ago, Notre Dame reopened, just as beautiful and even more so. Wood and brass that hadn't been cleaned in centuries now shine with a fresh polish. Flooring that was covered in ash now glimmers.

When all seems lost, when darkness overwhelms, the God of love loves us into new life - over and over again. That's why, every year, no matter what is happening in our lives or our world, we celebrate this day with blooming flowers, bells and brass, hundreds of voices in song, and, of course, the story of Christ's victory over human evil, of light overcoming darkness, of love defeating hate. Because nothing, and I mean nothing, not grief nor death nor crucifixion, not hatefulness nor brokenness nor the powers of empire, nothing will stop God's resurrection work in the world. Jesus Christ is risen, and we are made new by the God of goodness and love so we can bear that love to the world.

While it was still dark, God created a miracle. Thanks be to God!