



“The Grand Intrusion”

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

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Easter Sunday

“On the first day of the week, while it was still dark....” So the Easter story begins – in the darkness. The darkness is literal, of course. Mary Magdalene walked in the darkness because morning had not yet dawned.

As Mary also walked toward Jesus’ tomb, a shroud of darkness covered her soul. Jesus’ execution on Good Friday crushed all of Jesus’ disciples. Sunday morning, Mary and the others were still groping their way through a darkness of shock, grief, and haunting, vivid memories. In the end, when Jesus died, hope died too.

Later on Easter morning, two disciples fleeing the horror in Jerusalem stumbled toward home in shock and despair. One of them summed everything up simply and sadly, “We had hoped....”

When hope is lost, life seems empty, even futile. How do you get up in the morning, how do you keep going on when all you lived for is cruelly taken from you? What do you do when hope fades, and then is gone?

Most of us know the shock of sudden reversal or the stunning finality of death. Temporarily, sometimes permanently, hope dies.

All of us understand darkness better than we did last Easter. Hope has been severely damaged the past few months. The American Dream is tarnished. The assumption that progress is inevitable and each generation will rise higher than the preceding one is in question. Jobs - some of your jobs – are gone. Corporations and entire industries are no more, and some communities find themselves in jeopardy. No one knows the future, but one thing seems certain -- it won’t be like the past. At the least our hopes will likely readjust to more sobering realities.

Becoming better acquainted with darkness is not necessarily bad news. We don’t really understand – or experience -- Easter until we’ve spent some time in the darkness.

Mary Magdalene trudged along in the dark toward her sad task: a proper burial for the man who’d rescued her from deep darkness. We don’t know much about Mary. Most of the mythology surrounding her tells us more about Medieval European Christianity than Mary herself.

She was from a town in Galilee named Magdala, hence her nickname, Magdalene. She was an early disciple of Jesus, apparently a woman of means, who traveled with Jesus and, along with several other women, supported him financially.

Mary suffered from a mental disorder. They called it “seven demons” back then. Mary knew something about darkness. Her personal demons were darkness enough, but she

lived in a world with little mercy and much blame for people like her. Mary was a vulnerable woman in a man's world, made more dangerous by the occupying Roman army, foreign occupiers without the restraint of a Judeo-Christian ethic. They took what they wanted from whomever they chose. Mary lived at risk.

Then Mary of Magdala met Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth. Somehow, in a way beyond her understanding, he seemed to bear in himself the touch of eternity. His words bore weight that transformed lives and healed the sick. His touch made broken people whole. He silenced her demons and restored Mary's health and sanity.

She became a devoted follower of the man from Nazareth. His teaching began to reshape her life. The new community of his disciples welcomed Mary and offered her love and hope. She was certain that she was part of something that would change the world. God was at work – in her, in the community and in the world.

Jesus never tired of talking about the way God intends the world to be, a place of universal wholeness, peace, and prosperity. The prophets called it God's Shalom, the peace of the world. That shalom is more than the end of war and violence. Shalom is universal wholeness, prosperity, health and justice.

Shalom was the hope of Israel. Isaiah 25, our Old Testament Lesson, describes God's preferred future. Everyone will be whole. Life will be like a lavish banquet. Even the hills will leak vintage wine. And the shroud of death will be lifted from life. Someday, the world will be what it's supposed to be.

Jesus claimed God sent him to plant that new world in this old world. He called disciples to follow him into that new creation. The new community of disciples was precisely the place where God was at work changing lives and the world – one disciple at a time. He called it the Kingdom of God – on earth.

Mary seized her new destiny as a daughter of God on a journey toward a new world made in the image of God. That hope charged her life with energy, enlarged the size of her heart, and motivated her to love God and every other person in the world. Mary was transformed from the inside out. While this isn't a stewardship sermon, it's worth noting that when God got hold of Mary's life, generosity welled up in her, and she began to invest her wealth in the Kingdom of God.

It seemed like she was part of a divine moment that would recreate the world. With the rest of the disciples, she shouted "hosanna" as Jesus rode into Jerusalem that Sunday morning. They were quite sure Jesus was going to claim his throne and establish God's kingdom on earth.

No one, especially Mary, expected what happened that Friday. It was the day hope died. What seemed like the best good news in the universe – a message on which she'd staked her life – suddenly seemed a cruel joke. Everything that was good and decent had, again, been beaten back by cynical brokers of power. The promise of universal and equal justice for all was just that – a dream. Death destroyed the one who promised the life of God. It seemed God was impotent in the face of human reality.

As Mary walked along in the darkness, she carried a deeper darkness in herself.

You know the rest of the story! To Mary's shock and dismay, the stone was rolled back from the mouth of the tomb, and the tomb was empty. Mary's darkness deepened. She assumed grave robbers were at work, a common crime in the day.

Mary fled from the tomb and ran to tell Peter and John the bad news. They threw on their clothes and ran to confirm Mary's story. Sure enough, the tomb was empty. Both of them ran back home as fast as their legs would carry them and locked the door behind them. No one was safe anymore.

Mary stayed at the empty tomb and wept bitter tears of hopeless despair in the dim dawn light. John wants us to know this. Four times, he tells us, Mary was weeping.

Through her fog of tears Mary noticed a man standing beside her. She thought it was the gardener and blurted out an accusation clothed in a question, "Jesus' body is gone. Where is he? Did you take him?"

The stranger replied, "Mary." Suddenly, shockingly, astonishingly, everything changed in that instant. Not just for Mary. History shifted dramatically at the call of Mary's name.

Mary Magdalene, of all people. Mary, last at the cross and first at the tomb, Mary is the first witness to the resurrection. No figure in the entire story plays as significant a role as Mary on Easter morning. Mary is, in fact, the most important figure in the first critical days of the Christian movement.

Quickly, Mary ran to tell the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord." Later all of them would see him. But Mary was first and foremost. Mary's simple declaration is part of a deceptively simple declaration that changed the world.

Mary's Easter story is, perhaps, the most beautiful of the many lovely Easter stories. In each case, discouraged, hopeless disciples encounter the Risen One and are transformed by the experience. Taken together, the stories account for the rise of the Christian church out of ashes of dark despair after Good Friday.

These stories, lovely as they are, however, are much larger than the stories themselves. Easter is, above all else, a story about God. Easter is nothing less than the power of God at work in the darkness of this world. Good Friday is the astonishing good news that God takes the darkness of our lives and this world seriously. God knows and God understands the devastation of death, suffering, brokenness and dashed dreams. In Christ, God enters the darkness in order to change it.

Easter completes the good news. Easter declares in no uncertain terms that God is not content to leave us and the world the way we are. God is irrevocably committed to the creation and will not abandon it or us. Easter is God's grand intrusion into the darkness of real life to redeem it.

On Easter morning, God opened Mary's closed world and shattered her ordinary world with all its darkness with an extraordinary grace. That is the promised hope of Easter. God takes the stuff of our lives, darkness and all, and makes something good of it – and us.

Easter declares that God will not be defeated, that the recreation of the world and people in it is no figment of our imagination, but a living reality experienced by folks like us in places like this. God loves us too much to leave us alone in the darkness – or to leave us like we are.

Before long, Peter and the others, Mary included, announced to the world that no matter who, no matter where, no matter when, this good news is available to all who believe. Peter told a Roman Centurion named Cornelius, a member of the hated occupying force, that God was creating something grander and glorious than a mere Empire. And people like Cornelius were part of the plan.

Peter summed up the Christian message in a couple of sentences:

God sent Jesus to preach peace (shalom) to the world. God blessed everything Jesus did – God was with him. Evil forces conspired to kill Jesus but on the third day, he rose from the dead. Everyone who believes in him finds forgiveness and entrance into the new creation of God.

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The process is long and slow to be sure. But God is creating a new world in the midst of this old dark world. In fact God is taking the stuff of our worlds and our lives and recreating it all in the form of eternity.

The good news I bring you today is this: the Risen One is on the loose in the darkness, and he knows your name. His name is also Hope, and he longs for an encounter with any of us willing to open our closed lives to the God who made us and loves us.

Amen.

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