

While It Was Still Dark  
[John 20:1-18](#), [1Cor 15:1-11](#), [Acts 10:34-43](#)  
Easter Sunday Early Service

*While it was still dark* – our scripture reading follows the most dark and dreary time in the Christian faith. Throughout Holy Week we have experienced the activities of Jesus’ last days before he traveled the long, harsh, and cruel road to the cross. We witnessed Jesus’ closest followers abandon Jesus in his hour of need. We saw the chief priests and elders of the temple, who should have been part of Jesus’ inner circle acknowledging their Messiah, shout with passion, “Crucify Him!” In some small way through reflection during the season of Lent, we tried to experience a taste of Jesus’ betrayal and suffering.

*While it was still dark.* The beauty of being a part of the resurrection church is we know the ending of the story. We know that in the midst of sheer and complete darkness, God was at

work. Our scripture lesson from John notes that while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body.

The confusion and numbness of the horrible events witnessed by those in Jerusalem still lingered over Mary. Other gospels note that Mary the mother of James and Salome accompanied Mary Magdalene to the tomb to do the necessary but unpleasant task of taking care of the body of Christ. Yet God was at work *while it was still dark*.

*While it was still dark* the power of the light was forming.

The dawning of a new day was upon them. The realization that darkness would be gone forever was about to be known. I am a huge fan of "The Lord of the Rings" series. There is one particular scene (actually two) but the one I am thinking of occurs toward the end of the second movie when the good guys are trapped at Helm's Deep. Only a few soldiers are trying to hold off

an army of tens of thousands of soldiers of the dark. Just when it seems all hope is lost, Gandalf appears with an army of soldiers just at the sunlight crests over the ridge. Hope is rekindled. The light streams down the mountain as the soldiers descend to help win the day.

*While it was still dark* – the darkness surrounding Jesus' death was unfathomable. For those who had begun to believe there was some glimmer of hope among the oppressive actions of the occupying forces of Rome, they saw that hope shattered in a brutal and heart-wrenching manner. But God was at work *while it was still dark*.

Our scripture tells us Mary approached the tomb only to find the great stone rolled away. She immediately runs to tell the disciples that someone must have taken Jesus' body away. Peter and who we believe is John take off running. When they approach

the tomb, Peter runs in and finds what for us has become a familiar scene. An empty tomb, grave clothes lying flat and deserted, and a grave napkin for Jesus' head neatly folded and abandoned. *While it was still dark.*

The scripture continues and Mary remains at the tomb crying, still not understanding all that has happened. She sees angels, but it doesn't occur to her that something miraculous has happened. She is still thinking in earthly terms – where is the body of Jesus? Even when she sees Jesus, she still seems to be in a daze because in spite of the time she spent with him, she did not recognize him. Some have theorized that perhaps Jesus didn't have the same physical appearance. That may be the case, or perhaps Mary is still in that numb, mechanical phase one goes through after experience a significant loss. For whatever reason, *it was still dark* for Mary and the world.

It seems all at once light dawns in every sense of the term. Jesus calls her by name, the shades fall off her eyes, and realization sets in. This was a true light bulb moment! By all accounts and purposes, Jesus had accomplished the impossible. There was no possibility of keeping this message silent! Mary experienced the depths of despair followed by unspeakable joy – Jesus has risen from the dead!

I wonder just how fast Mary ran, skirts and all, to spread the news to the disciples. Can you imagine the buzz of excitement? I'm sure the local network was on full alert just as dawn broke across the horizon. It was truly the dawn of a new day. I can picture Mary coming into town, with her face beaming, possibly tears of joy streaming down her face, her voice unsteady but sure at the same time. She goes straight to the disciples and tells them everything. Despite how impossible her story may have sounded,

my guess is the glow on her face and the hitch in her voice left no room for doubt – she was speaking an incredible truth. Jesus the Messiah has risen from the dead! All is not lost! Hope is once again restored! That is something to get excited about!

This is Easter Sunday morning. The origins of **Easter** date to the beginnings of Christianity, and it is probably the oldest Christian observance after the Sabbath (observed on Saturday). Later, the Sabbath came to be regarded as the weekly celebration of the Resurrection on Sunday. The celebration of Easter represents a convergence of the three traditions - Pagan, Hebrew and Christian.

The name of the holiday is based on the pagan goddess Eostre, goddess of spring, to whom the month of April was dedicated. The festival of Eostre was celebrated at the vernal equinox, when the day and night gets an equal share of the day.

The Hebrew ties to the Passover are easy to see as Jesus was crucified during a Passover feast and rose 3 days later. The name "Easter" came into play as English Christians wanted others to accept Christianity; hence they decided to use the name Easter for the original pagan [holiday](#) of the old spring celebration.

The Sunday of Pascha (Passover) had become a holiday to honor Christ. At the same time many of the pagan spring rites came to be a part of its celebration. The problem was calculating the exact date for Easter, since Christians were soon following a Roman calendar instead of a Hebrew calendar. Through much ado, the Council of Nicaea in 325 decided that Easter should fall on Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox. The dating of Easter today follows the same - the first day of the full moon that occurs on or following the spring equinox on

March 21 - it became a movable feast between March 21 and April 25.

So today, we celebrate Easter. For Christians this is the pinnacle of the year. The tomb is empty. Jesus rose from the dead. We are no longer slaves to our sin but free in Jesus Christ. In spite of continued persecution, the early church began and spread throughout the regions based on the testimony of those who witnessed Jesus' miraculous resurrection.

So, what does all this mean for us nearly 2,000 years later? I would like to share part of a story circulating on the internet. The question was raised, 'Why did Jesus fold the napkin?' You may recall that in the gospel lesson, Peter goes to the empty tomb to find the grave clothes and the napkin that had been placed over Jesus head neatly folded. In order to understand the significance of the folded napkin, you have to understand a little bit about

Hebrew tradition of that day. The folded napkin had to do with the Master and Servant, and every Jewish boy knew this tradition.

When the servant set the dinner table for the master, he made sure that it was exactly the way the master wanted it. The table was furnished perfectly, and then the servant would wait, just out of sight, until the master had finished eating, and the servant would not dare touch that table, until the master was finished.

Now if the master were done eating, he would rise from the table, wipe his fingers, his mouth, and clean his beard, and would wad up that napkin and toss it onto the table. The servant would then know to clear the table. For in those days, the wadded napkin meant, 'I'm done.' But if the master got up from the table, and folded his napkin, and laid it beside his plate, the servant would not dare touch the table, because.....

The folded napkin meant, 'I'm coming back!'

Jesus is Coming Back! The story doesn't end with Easter – it only begins here. Jesus will return to fulfill the prophesy of a new heaven and a new earth. In the mean time, we are here to celebrate God's incredible love for us as we pledge to love God and love and care for each other. Share God's love with your neighbor. Celebrate the good news of the empty tomb and our risen Lord. Hallelujah! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.