

“I Have seen the Lord!”

John 20:1-18

Around the turn of the 20th Century, there lived a man named Reuben John Smith. Smith was fond of the comforts of life. Since he had lived a comfortable existence in this world, he thought it only proper to be prepared for a comfortable existence in the next world as well. Thus, at his death, he left detailed instructions concerning his burial.

He was to be buried in a new recliner chair of upholstered russet leather. He was to be interred in a sitting position. On his lap was to be placed a checkerboard with his side nearly all kinged and primed to win. An ever-practical man, Smith also ordered that he be dressed in a hat and coat, and that a key to the tomb be placed in his coat pocket. That was a notable final touch: a key to the tomb. It seems he expected he might have a chance to use it. As far as anyone knows, however, that key has yet to be used.

As far as we know, no one has ever had the chance to use a grave key, or any other device, to get themselves out after death. Except once! The time was just before dawn. The place was a garden. In the garden was a tomb; freshly hewn from rock. A giant stone that once sealed the sepulcher had been rolled aside. Some grief-stricken women had made their way to that lonely spot. Of these women our Gospel lesson this morning only identifies one; Mary Magdalene. Among the names included in the other Gospels are Mary, the mother of Jesus and James, Joanna, Salome, and another Mary; perhaps the sister of Lazarus and Martha. The silence of the night and the despair of the occasion caused them to move quietly toward the place where the body of one they had called Lord had been lain. They brought spices with which to anoint him.

Imagine their alarm to discover the stone rolled away from the tomb; then fright to find the tomb empty. He was not there. What did it mean? Had his final resting place been desecrated by grave robbers? Had his enemies hated and feared him so much that they had seized his broken body? The women quickly scattered to tell their families and friends of this disturbing development. Mary, the Magdalene, rushed to inform Peter and John, who then ran with breakneck speed to the tomb to see for themselves. Perplexed, they returned to the safety and seclusion of that upper room where the men who had also once called this slain man Lord were now hiding.

Mary Magdalene was now left alone in that garden with only her grief. Weeping, she becomes suddenly conscious of a man standing near her. He asks, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" With deep anguish in her voice she asks, "Sir, if you are the one who has carried him away, tell me where, that I may reclaim him." Then this supposed stranger speaks her name, "Mary." Perhaps, at just that moment, the sun was just beginning to peep sleepily over some nearby Judean hillside, illuminating the featureless night. Tear swollen eyes combined with pre-dawn darkness would explain Mary's failure to have recognized this man sooner. Whatever the cause, there was now a sunrise in Mary's heart. "Rabbi!" she exclaimed. With a sudden surge of emotional release, she embraced him.

It was the natural response of a deep and grateful love. It was this man, after all, who had made a new person of Mary. What her malady or life condition had been exactly is a matter of speculation. But the result of this man's intervention, and Mary's absolute devotion to him, was beyond speculation. Impulsively she embraced him. Jesus stopped her, however, with the explanation that time was short, and she must go and tell the others what she now knew. She would have to be content to hold him in her heart. Returning to the others, she would now testify, "I have seen the Lord!"

This is Mary's Magdalene's Resurrection story. But, what does it have to do with your life and mine? **Consider this: Easter was born in the darkness.** Note the utter hopelessness that enshrouded all those who had followed Jesus after his crucifixion. It was abundantly clear that the Disciples no longer believed that Jesus was the hope of the world. For us, Easter Sunday is a day of bright colors, joyful music, and enthusiastic worship. We cannot appreciate the full power of the Easter message, though, unless we understand that that first Easter was born in total darkness.

The two nights following Jesus' crucifixion were the longest nights that those who loved him had ever endured. They cowered now behind closed doors; their emotions a mixture of cynicism and despair. Perhaps you have been there. You and I have lived for a while now behind closed doors. Perhaps you have gone through your own long night. But it's just here that Mary's story proclaims Good News. Easter was not born in the brightness of the day. Easter came in the darkness.

Now consider this in Mary's Resurrection story: Jesus found Mary in that darkness. Mary had come back to the garden. Coming to the tomb, she peered in again. Perhaps, in her mind she hoped, the whole thing was just a hideous nightmare. Then sensing that someone was behind her, she turned.

So, we see two simple and yet very profound reasons why Mary did not recognize Jesus. First, aside from the dark, she could not because her tears had blinded her so that she could not see. When we lose a dear one, dearer perhaps to us than our own lives, there is deep sorrow in our hearts, and tears flood our eyes. We need that. We need to let go and feel that depth of the pain and the sorrow. But, note second, that Mary's back was to Jesus. She could not recognize him because she faced away. Her eyes were fixed on the tomb, so her back was to Jesus.

The darkness of the moment and our tear swollen eyes may blind us to the friend who is standing quietly in the shadows nearby. Softly, he asks, “Why are you weeping? Why are you in such despair?” After listening to our complaint, he calls our name. We are not to let those needed tears blind us to the very real hope of our faith; the hope of eternity, and life beyond life. Death is never the end, because of Jesus; because of Easter. In our moment of greatest need he will find you and me, and we will realize that he has been there all the time. He is not dead, he is alive! Christ is alive, and because he is alive, we discover that the sun does rise again, joy is real again, and life returns again. Jesus found Mary in the darkness. He will find you as well.

Here’s one more thing to consider about Mary’s Resurrection story: Jesus had a plan and a promise for Mary. The plan, at that moment, was simple: “Go,” he said, “tell the others.” Much has been made of this part of the story. The speculation is nearly endless, and boundless in its conclusions. But here is an insight worth noting. The force of the language used here suggests that Mary, overcome by relief and joy, had actually fully embraced the Lord in a hold of impassioned and deep love. Jesus, knowing that time was of the essence stopped her, and said, “I have not yet gone to my Father.” That is, “I’m still here for you Mary, but I am here for the others also. Go and tell them that I will be ascending soon.” Jesus was not abandoning Mary and sending her away. He was including her in a plan, his plan, and giving her a promise: “I’m still here for you. I have not yet gone.” In the hope and strength of that plan and promise, Mary went and declared to the others, “I have seen the Lord!”

When Jesus finds you and me, we long to hold him fast, just for ourselves. As in the words of the old Gospel tune that illustrates this very moment in our lesson, we would stay in the Garden with him, alone. But, he includes us in his plan: he bids us go and tell what has

happened to us, because others need to know. And, as with Mary Magdalene, he gives us the promise: he will always be here for us.

The Lord comes to us in the darkness. When finally we turn and see him, and embrace him, the light of a new day dawns. We are drawn out of despair into new life; a Resurrection, here and now; a present sign of the one yet to come. Believe the promise. Go with the plan. Go, with Mary, and tell everyone, "I have seen the Lord!"