

"WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK"

A Sermon By

Rev. Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
Easter Day. April 3, 1988

## "WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK"

### INTRODUCTION

Yesterday's reading in the Sanctuary told the delightful story of a ten year old boy who was playing left field in a Little League game. As he was standing out there in left field all by himself, a man called over to him, "Hey kid, who's winning?" The boy replied, "We are!" "What's the score?" asked the man. The boy replied, "It's 23 - 0... their favor". "They're beating you...23 - 0? But I thought you said you were winning". "We are" said the boy..."we haven't come up to bat yet!"

Isn't that delightful! Who was it who said, "The game's not over 'til it's over?" Joe Biden? No...but we all know who said it. "The game's not over 'til it's over". Why? Because there's still some unfinished business to take care of. And so with the immortal words of the mortal Yogi Berra somewhere in the background as our "unofficial text", let's turn to this morning's glorious Easter Lesson. It begins in John's Gospel with these words,

"Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb."

### DEVELOPMENT

What time of day was it? The Scriptures do not tell us exactly, but it was "while it was still dark". And in this one seemingly insignificant little phrase rests the entire story of what is to come. "While it was still dark" suggests that whatever is to follow is linked dramatically to that which has already happened in the still, dark silence of the night.

We know that a body had been placed in a tomb late on Good Friday, that a heavy stone had been then rolled into place to seal off the entrance and that a soldier had been sent to guard the tomb so that no one could come in the night and steal the body of Jesus. Yet, that stone had been moved and the tomb was empty and no one had seen these events happen. But, happen they did and in the darkness of the night.

We need not read any further to know that what follows is a result of some "unfinished business". Since no man nor woman moved that stone, John suggests right at the beginning that this must be "God's doing". That the affairs at hand represent God's action, God's plan, God's "unfinished business". Human beings had nothing to do with it.

On with the story. Seeing the stone moved away, Mary is frightened and runs to get Peter and John - two of the disciples. She tells them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him." Immediately, all three begin to run toward the tomb. John's in better shape than Peter and he gets there first. He looks around, but decides to wait for Peter and then together they go inside the tomb and there they see the linen cloths and the napkin which had been placed on the head of Jesus. Not knowing what to make of all this, the story says that these two disciples "went back to their homes".

### BUT MARY STAYS

But Mary stays outside the tomb and cries. Alone. Broken-hearted. Finally, she pulls herself together and decides to look inside and standing at the entrance, she stopps to look into the tomb.

With no forewarning she sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had rested. One angel asks, "Woman...why are you weeping?" Mary replies, "Because they have taken away my Lord". Saying this, Mary turns around and sees Jesus standing there beside her, but she does not recognize Him. He, too, asks, "Woman, why are you weeping?" And supposing Him to be the gardener, she says to Him, "Sir...if you have carried Him away...tell me where He is". Jesus then calls her by name, "Mary". Hearing not only her name, but the One who says it, Mary knows who this person is. It is Jesus. And in the mystery and the wonder of that glorious moment, she replies, "Rabboni" - which means Teacher.

From here our passage concludes with the instruction of Jesus to Mary that she is to return to the disciples and tell them what she has seen. One wonders how she was ever able to find the words to describe what she had experienced.

#### HOW WE FEEL ABOUT GOD

Some reflections on this. I have come to notice and appreciate that most ministers and priests interpret "ministry" by the way they view people. For instance, Billy Graham views people as "lost". His ministry is the message of salvation. On the other hand, Robert Schuller and Norman Vincent Peale both view people as having low self-esteem. Their ministry is that you are important and precious. Oral Roberts tends to view people as sick or diseased, out of money and incapable of believing in a good God. His ministry emphasizes healing, and "seed faith", and "greater is the ONE who is in you than the one that is in the world". Jesse Jackson has over the years viewed people as oppressed. His ministry has been a message of liberation.

Certainly all of these ministers have validity in their view of people and in their understanding of God. However, I find myself leaning toward or holding another interpretation. I often find myself thinking of people and viewing people as being out of "relationship"...alienated from God, from ourselves and from those around us. Much of my ministry has been directed toward reconciliation. And much of my time as a pastor is spent in helping people to think and to feel better about God, about themselves and about those around them.

And if there is a dominant theme to my theology, it comes down to this one thing: how we feel about God will determine how we feel about ourselves and how we feel about other people. In other words, our faith in God is more than simply that which we feel and think about God. It is also the determinant ingredient in how we think and feel about ourselves and other people, too.

If what you know about God is rooted in your view of other people, your God "is too small". God is more than the sum total of mankind's goodness, mercy and love. God is more - much more! And if what you know about God is rooted in your view of yourself, at best you are limited to the humanity of Jesus at the neglect of His divinity. God is more - much more! Finally, if we are to have a relationship with God and try to "de-alienate" ourselves from Him, then for us it begins and ends with faith. There is nothing more than faith, and we can afford nothing less than faith.

#### TWO KINDS OF FAITH IF YOU BELIEVE IN GOD

For all of those who believe in God, there are basically two kinds of faith from which to choose and we see hints of both at work here in the Easter story.

The FIRST kind of faith was exemplified by the two disciples, Peter and John. They were told that the body had been moved. They ran to the tomb, went inside and saw that the body was not there. Did they still believe in God? Yes. Did they still believe that Jesus was the Christ? Yes, they did. But when they could not find the body of Jesus they left the tomb broken-hearted and walked slowly back to their homes. Why? Because they did not see any "Good News"...someone had come and stolen the body of Jesus and that was the end of the story. The business of faith was over. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Now His body had been stolen. They went back home with their heads in their hands probably thinking that they would never know who took the body of Jesus.

The SECOND kind of faith was exemplified by Mary. When the disciples left, she remained at the tomb. Did she still believe in God. Yes. Did she still believe that Jesus was the Christ? Yes, she did. But she was not emotionally ready to go back home and tell people about the missing body. Her heart was broken, too - like the disciples'. But she was not ready to return to her home and take up other tasks. Having stayed there "in the darkness", she was surprised by the presence of Jesus. Her faith was given "new life" and she was asked to tell the disciples the rest of the story.

THE POINT IS            The point of all this for us is that sometimes we leave the darkened tomb too early and give up and say "it's the end". Sometimes we look through "eyes of discouragement" and believe that business is all over. That's it. Ring down the curtain. End of story. Amen.

Or, to use the imagery of the Easter story, sometimes we know that the body has been moved. Who moved it? Why? Where? When? We do not know. And then at other times we stay around long enough to discover that only has the body been moved, but it has "risen" as well. That it's God's doing. Things are alive. We almost left too soon...there are some "loop-holes" in this universe and yes, we need to take that "leap of faith".

The two disciples went back to their homes believing that the whole matter was over. Mary, on the other hand, stayed there in the darkness a bit longer and discovered that there was still some unfinished business on God's agenda. For the disciples it had finished in total despair. For Mary, the glorious event had just begun in total splendor. That's the second kind of faith.

GOD IS NOT YET FINISHED            This is Easter Day and I'm here to remind you that God is not yet finished. He is not finished with your relationship with Him. And I wonder...are you? He is not yet finished with your relationship with yourself. Are you? He is not yet finished with your relationship with other people. Are You? What is your faith suggesting to you. Is business over with nothing more to be done, or is there still some unfinished work to be done. Like Peter and John, are you ready to leave the tomb and return home. That's it. It's all over. Or is there something of Mary at work in you....having been in the darkness, keeping your heart open and sensitive to the mysterious touch or word from the "other world"?

It can happen. And I'm here to proclaim that it does happen. Sometimes it can take the form reconciliation. Let me bring this Easter message to a close by sharing with you something that came to my desk on Thursday afternoon in an envelope along with some financial reports from the Hospital Chaplaincy program. It touched me as I read it and I share it with you for its message

speaks of God at work in our world with some unfinished business.

It begins with a phone call. The phone rang and Sam could hardly believe the voice on the other end. "Your son, David, has AIDS. The doctor at the Medical Center gives him a week at the most. Please, don't come to see him". "Why?" "It would be too upsetting."

Sam had not seen or heard from David in 20 years. They had argued about the Viet Nameese War for weeks. Enraged, Sam threw his "war-Protosting" son out of the house. The father had named the son after his brother, David, a World War II hero who had died in the Battle of the Bulge, December of '44. Sam wanted to see his son and shared his dilemma with his pastor in their small Vermont town. The pastor tracked down the Chaplaincy's head chaplain at the hospital in the city who, in turn, encouraged the father to write to his son, and David soon received the following letter.

"Dear David,

You are blood of my blood, heart of my heart, but more than that....I love you.

It is empty to say all the things that should have been said, things that should have been done, at a time like this. I don't know how many times that I would start to call and not be able. All the stupid reasons, all the dumb hang-ups and now time is catching up.

David, my son, I ask that I may see you...to simply be with you and to tell you that I love you. Your sister, Cathy, and brother, Charles, ask the same and we pray that you will grant us this request. May God be at your side and I pray...that we may be beside you also.

Love, Dad"

The enclosure from the Chaplaincy continued. One of our student chaplains has been ministering to David and his long time companion, John, for many weeks. After some encouragement, John invited Sam and his two other children to come visit David. Two days later they were reconciled. Sam spent most of the next two days with his son. He beamed when he told the chaplains that his son was a vice-president for a major financial firm. Four days later David died. All unfinished business had been put to rest.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Here is a test to prove to you whether or not you still have "unfinished business" with God, with yourself or with other people. If you are alive, God is not yet finished. Yes, "the game's not over 'til it's over". And really....it makes no difference how dark the hour....or what the score may be. God is not yet finished.

Happy Easter!

PRAYER      O Risen Lord of all life, we pause here at the end of our Easter service...in moments of prayer and wonder. The Good News once again overwhelms us. Christ is risen - risen indeed! And we ask that somehow we might comprehend more of the great mystery of this day as we stand before You cradling our newborn hopes.

Come close to each of us and touch what is dead within us and bring us into newness of life. Transform our timid caution into joyful confidence and strong assurance. Strengthen us to believe that "in Christ" shall all be made alive...that someday God will wipe away every tear, that someday death shall be no more, and neither shall there be mourning or crying.

Let Thy word of hope and resurrection bid once again for the hearts of all people everywhere until in the light that streams from Joseph's Garden, we see our world, our neighbor, and ourselves....only through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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My personal greetings to all of you on this Easter Day and special greetings, of course, to those of you whom we don't get to see as often as we would like to...which reminds me of an Easter not too long ago when a woman came up to me at the door following the service and issued something of a complaint. She said,

"You know....it seems that every time I come here to church you're always singing the same hymn, 'Christ, the Lord, Is Risen Today'".

Well, it was clear to me how often she came to church since we only sing that hymn once a year in the Spring....but on to the Easter message. I heard about a family that was gathered around their television set watching a movie on the life of Jesus. The seven year old daughter was deeply moved as the movie maker realistically portrayed the crucifixion and death of Jesus on Good Friday. Tears ran down the little girl's face as they took Him down from the cross and placed His body in a borrowed tomb. She watched intently as a guard was posted outside the garden tomb and then....suddenly....a big smile came across her face and she jumped up on the arm of the chair and said with great anticipation:

"And now comes the GOOD part!"

And that's the reason you and I are here today....to celebrate the "good part" of the last days of the pilgrimage of Jesus here on earth. We're here to give thanks for His victory over sin and human selfishness...and yes, His victory through death. We're here to join our voices with those of His faithful followers the world over who this day are singing, "Christ, the Lord, IS Risen Today".

### DEVELOPMENT

Now, in order to round out and complete our celebration, I would ask that you focus your attention for twenty minutes or so on these words from John's Gospel,

"Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark"

In other words, she came to the tomb before day-break. John, here, was simply reporting the facts. Yet, there is another way that these words may be interpreted....for after all, the writers of the New Testament, as well as Jesus, Himself, often used the imagery of darkness and light to signify something else. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb "while it was still dark". Darkness could refer to a world without Christ, to a world without hope, to a world of nothing but sin and selfishness and death, a world where God's promises have been forgotten and where people feel utterly alone and forsaken.

Darkness is much more than the absence of sunlight. Right? Darkness is a spiritual condition in which the presence of God is no longer felt in a life.

Mary came to the tomb while it was still dark....on Friday, her Master had been crucified. Nails had pierced His hands, His feet. A sword had been thrust into His side. She watched Him die a horrible death and then...as the sun went down she helped to place her precious Lord in a borrowed tomb. How could all of this be? Where was God when all of this was taking place. She could not understand....she could not take it all "in"...

It reminds me of the story of the ten year old boy who grew up in a military family and lived on US bases around the world. His father would often regale him with stirring tales of military exploits. One day in Sunday School the boy's teacher gave the children a graphic description of the death of Jesus on the cross. He listened in astonishment and then when there was a pause and a moment for questions, he asked....

"What I want to know is....WHERE were the Marines?"

Perhaps Mary wondered the same thing? Where were the Marines...or where were the ten thousand angels? Where was God? Was there no one around to prevent this terrible miscarriage of justice? The light of Mary's world must have been snuffed out as she stood there at the foot of the cross and heard Jesus doubt and question....."MY GOD...My God...why hast THOU forsaken ME?"

She came to the tomb that morning..."while it was still dark". There is something about darkness, isn't there? Which is your favorite month? January? Or April? Lift a hand if it's January....Now, what about April? There is an illness, I understand, that some people suffer that causes them to get depressed in the absence of light and the disease is not all that rare. In fact, Dr. Michael Gitlin, a specialist in this illness, says that many persons who suffer from the so-called "winter blahs" or "winter blues" might benefit from a combination of drug treatment and exposure to light. He writes,

"We're now finding that light may augment the response to 'anti-depressant' drugs. Some people experience depression according to seasonal patterns. These are the people who get depressed when the days get shorter....." And what these folks need, according to this Dr. Gitlin is light!

"While it was still dark....Mary Magdalene came to the tomb". And that darkness was not only physical, but it was spiritual as well.

Someone put a book into my hands years ago entitled, When It Was Dark. As I recall, the author, a Guy Thornton, writing at the turn of this century, was describing graphically the moral collapse that would occur if the world were suddenly to discover that the resurrection of Jesus was nothing but a big hoax. And, as I recall, the climax of that novel told what happened the day after people heard the news....the news that Christ never rose. The results were horrible...although in the end the conspiracy was exposed and the villain was carried off to some kind of asylum. That's what they were called in 1903.

But the point is that a world without Christ would be a dark world, indeed. Imagine our world with its scores of hospitals and homes with deep roots in the Christian faith closed down....and the world Christian universities and shelters for the homeless closing their doors. Imagine people with no basis for moral decisions, or of a world without Handel's Messiah or Bach's great melodies....a world without altars at which to marry people. Imagine a world society without any sense of spiritual purpose and direction. Some may be tempted to suggest and to argue that we already have such a society...and how sad.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of someone she loved..."while it was still dark".

And perhaps you have, too....come to the tomb of someone you have loved while it was still dark. I have several times and I know that sooner or later all of us do. A parent, a child, a wife, a husband, a friend.... perhaps you have been there...recently. You know the loneliness...the feelings...

NOT THE END OF THE STORY

But fortunately, that is not the end of the story for when she reached the tomb, she found the stone rolled away and the body gone. Vanished! The tomb was empty. What was going on? What had they done with Him?

I'm reminded of something humorous that happened to an aspiring and talented young actor....at least I think it's funny, but not everyone shares my sense of humor. It seems that he was given a small role in a detective thriller and for him it was a "break"...a time of glory and achievement. They were out "on the road" and they came into a city where they were to give several performances, but the first night they ran into a bit of problem. They didn't have time for a run through...a rehearsal. That was the first of two problems. And the second was that the stage was somewhat smaller than they had been led to believe.

The actor...Robert Rankine..had but one line to offer. He was a policeman and the action proceeded on stage, including the obligatory murder....which prompted the call for the police. His moment came and rushing on to the stage "on cue", he unfortunately stumbled over the corpse and fell flat on his face. But he arose with as much dignity as he could muster and, ignoring the corpse over which he had just fallen, delivered his one line: "Where's the body?"

That was the question on the lips of Mary Magdalene. Fear and wonderment were gripping her soul. Had His enemies come and taken it away? She rushed out to find the disciples and when they arrived on the scene and confirmed her discovery, she was all the more confused. And she stood, outside the tomb, weeping....and as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb. And now she saw two angelis....dressed in white....sitting, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been placed late on Friday evening. They spoke to her and asked:

"Woman....why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord...and I do not know where they have laid Him."

When she had said this, she turned around and beheld Jesus....standing there.... but she did not recognize Him. Jesus said to her,

"Woman....why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"  
And she...supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him,  
"Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him and I will take Him away". And then it happened.  
Jesus spoke her name....."MARY!"

Mary Magdalene turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" which means, "teacher". And she rushed forward to hold Him in her arms, but Jesus said to her:

"Do not hold Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to the brethren and say to them: 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'"

Mary did as she was told and she said to them, "I have seen the Lord!" And that, of course, is the heart of the story. Christ, Who was dead, was now alive. And pardon....if you will....this play on words, but I cannot resist it. To me it seems so appropriate. Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb while it was still dark, but now the SON was risen. And therein is the message of Easter, when you come right down to it. In the midst of our deepest darkness, the SON always rises. There is hope! There is promise! The Son of God has risen!

WHAT DO WE MAKE OF IT

At times I wonder if we really know what to make of Easter in our rather cynical world. Perhaps we think we do for an hour or so on a Sunday like this...while we're here in the sanctuary with the sweet scent of lilies and the glad sound of "alleluias" in the air and as we hear once again how Mary's anguish left her when the reality of Christ's resurrection swept away her tears and led her to run off and tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"...and to hear Him call her by name.

However, you and I, hopefully, are pre-conditioned by too much of our past experience to expect the worst: deception, cheating, lying, arson, crime and violence in our streets and wars in the world. We're likely to wonder whether today's bad news isn't too much for us to deal with in our fragile city. How does Easter, the "Good News" of this April day, fit into all the bad news we hear so constantly? Do you ever find yourself feeling or wondering like this?

If we think that Easter is an easy answer to all that's wrong in the world, we're wrong. Easter isn't a quick fix and never was. In some ways, the disciples' difficulties were just beginning that first Easter, but no matter what those difficulties would prove to be, they now knew that Christ had not abandoned them, that God had not departed from them, and just as death was not the end of Christ, it won't be our end either.

Just as the mob that yelled "crucify Him" on Good Friday did not foil God's purpose then, neither can the Six O'Clock News. God's purpose is life. God's purpose is abundant life...for all of His children. Easter means that God's purpose will ultimately prevail...and not just for us while we smell the lilies and hear the "alleluias" in church this day, but for all this cynical and doubting world. I urge you then: don't let the world's cynicism infect you.

Mary came to the tomb, "while it was still dark". But that darkness for her was soon overcome with light as she searched for Him. Maybe this is the message you need to hear this Easter Day. Perhaps, for whatever reason...you are in darkness right now. Family concerns. Problems at work. No work. Anxiety about your health. Worries about your future. The loss of someone you love. Easter comes and with it comes the promise of more than stars in our darkness. Someone once said that "When it gets dark enough...you can see the stars". Yes, there's truth, but let's go a step further. For Mary, the darkness did not remain. The dawn broke. God's Son had risen and the light of that event which we celebrate has brightened the life of mankind from that day down to this!

I'M NO DEAD, YET

As you walk through the High Street of that great, old city of Edinburgh, Scotland...not far from the castle, you will notice a tiny alleyway, hardly wide enough for two persons to pass and over it is the carving of a boy's face...now dimmed much by years of dour, Scots weather. Over the boy's face is a message that says:

"Heave away, chaps....I'm no dead...yet!"

There's a story behind that carving. The boy's face and those words are there to remind the on-looker of something that happened there on that site in Edinburgh, just off of High Street, many years ago. An accident buried a number of persons under the rubble of a fallen building. And for hours on end the men struggled to dig through the bricks and the dirt to see if there were any survivors. They were just about to give up their search for survivors when a buried Scots lad summoned his last bit of energy to call out a message to those who had been digging and digging. "Heave away chaps...for I'm no dead, yet".

And that's the message that comes on a day like this...bringing light into our darkened world. "Heave 'way, chaps...I'm no dead, yet". To me, it's a message of hope, of healing, of promise, of comfort, a message of faith in the future.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments that come now at the end of this Easter service.

May the message of Easter help us to rise above personal despair and discouragement. Let our voices rise above the voices of cynicism that may surround us out there in the world....as we remember once again the story of Mary and how she came to the tomb while it was still dark and left reassured by hearing the voice of Jesus call her by name. So may it be with each of us, that we may hear His voice speaking in our hearts....lifting us and sending us on our way....that we may be led to tell others tomorrow, "I have seen the Lord"....and yes, the ground is firm beneath our feet, and there is a guiding, shaping hand at the helm.

All of this in the spirit of the Risen Christ. Amen.

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But the point is that a world without Christ would be a dark world, indeed. Imagine our world with its scores of hospitals and homes with deep roots in the Christian faith closed down....and the world Christian universities and shelters for the homeless closing their doors. Imagine people with no basis for moral decisions, or of a world without Handel's Messiah or Bach's great melodies....a world without altars at which to marry people. Imagine a world society without any sense of spiritual purpose and direction. Some may be tempted to suggest and to argue that we already have such a society...and how sad.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb of someone she loved..."while it was still dark".

And perhaps you have, too....come to the tomb of someone you have loved while it was still dark. I have several times and I know that sooner or later all of us do. A parent, a child, a wife, a husband, a friend.... perhaps you have been there...recently. You know the loneliness...the feelings...

NOT THE END OF THE STORY

But fortunately, that is not the end of the story for when she reached the tomb, she found the stone rolled away and the body gone. Vanished! The tomb was empty. What was going on? What had they done with Him?

I'm reminded of something humorous that happened to an aspiring and talented young actor....at least I think it's funny, but not everyone shares my sense of humor. It seems that he was given a small role in a detective thriller and for him it was a "break"...a time of glory and achievement. They were out "on the road" and they came into a city where they were to give several performances, but the first night they ran into a bit of problem. They didn't have time for a run through...a rehearsal. That was the first of two problems. And the second was that the stage was somewhat smaller than they had been led to believe.

The actor...Robert Rankins..had but one line to offer. He was a policeman and the action proceeded on stage, including the obligatory murder....which prompted the call for the police. His moment came and rushing on to the stage "on cue", he unfortunately stumbled over the corpse and fell flat on his face. But he arose with as much dignity as he could muster and, ignoring the corpse over which he had just fallen, delivered his one line: "Where's the body?"

That was the question on the lips of Mary Magdalene. Fear and wonderment were gripping her soul. Had His enemies come and taken it away? She rushed out to find the disciples and when they arrived on the scene and confirmed her discovery, she was all the more confused. And she stood, outside the tomb, weeping....and as she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb. And now she saw two angels....dressed in white....sitting, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been placed late on Friday evening. They spoke to her and asked:

"Woman....why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord...and I do not know where they have laid Him."

When she had said this, she turned around and beheld Jesus....standing there.... but she did not recognize Him. Jesus said to her,

"Woman....why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?"  
And she...supposing Him to be the gardener, said to Him,  
"Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him and I will take Him away". And then it happened.  
Jesus spoke her name....."MARY!"

Mary Magdalene turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" which means, "teacher". And she rushed forward to hold Him in her arms, but Jesus said to her:

"Do not hold Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to the brethren and say to them: 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.'"

Mary did as she was told and she said to them, "I have seen the Lord!" And that, of course, is the heart of the story. Christ, Who was dead, was now alive. And pardon....if you will....this play on words, but I cannot resist it. To me it seems so appropriate. Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb while it was still dark, but now the SON was risen. And therein is the message of Easter, when you come right down to it. In the midst of our deepest darkness, the SON always rises. There is hope! There is promise! The Son of God has risen!

WHAT DO WE MAKE OF IT

At times I wonder if we really know what to make of Easter in our rather cynical world. Perhaps we think we do for an hour or so on a Sunday like this...while we're here in the sanctuary with the sweet scent of lilies and the glad sound of "alleluias" in the air and as we hear once again how Mary's anguish left her when the reality of Christ's resurrection swept away her tears and led her to run off and tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"...and to hear Him call her by name.

However, you and I, hopefully, are pre-conditioned by too much of our past experience to expect the worst: deception, cheating, lying, arson, crime and violence in our streets and wars in the world. We're likely to wonder whether today's bad news isn't too much for us to deal with in our fragile city. How does Easter, the "Good News" of this April day, fit into all the bad news we hear so constantly? Do you ever find yourself feeling or wondering like this?

If we think that Easter is an easy answer to all that's wrong in the world, we're wrong. Easter isn't a quick fix and never was. In some ways, the disciples' difficulties were just beginning that first Easter, but no matter what those difficulties would prove to be, they now knew that Christ had not abandoned them, that God had not departed from them, and just as death was not the end of Christ, it won't be our end either.

Just as the mob that yelled "crucify Him" on Good Friday did not foil God's purpose then, neither can the Six O'Clock News. God's purpose is life. God's purpose is abundant life...for all of His children. Easter means that God's purpose will ultimately prevail...and not just for us while we smell the lilies and hear the "alleluias" in church this day, but for all this cynical and doubting world. I urge you then: don't let the world's cynicism infect you.

Mary came to the tomb, "while it was still dark". But that darkness for her was soon overcome with light as she searched for Him. Maybe this is the message you need to hear this Easter Day. Perhaps, for whatever reason...you are in darkness right now. Family concerns. Problems at work. No work. Anxiety about your health. Worries about your future. The loss of someone you love. Easter comes and with it comes the promise of more than stars in our darkness. Someone once said that "When it gets dark enough...you can see the stars". Yes, there's truth, but let's go a step further. For Mary, the darkness did not remain. The dawn broke. God's Son had risen and the light of that event which we celebrate has brightened the life of mankind from that day down to this!

I'M NO DEAD, YET

As you walk through the High Street of that great, old city of Edinburgh, Scotland...not far from the castle, you will notice a tiny alleyway, hardly wide enough for two persons to pass and over it is the carving of a boy's face...now dimmed much by years of dour, Scots weather. Over the boy's face is a message that says:

"Heave away, chaps....I'm no dead...yet!"

There's a story behind that carving. The boy's face and those words are there to remind the on-looker of something that happened there on that site in Edinburgh, just off of High Street, many years ago. An accident buried a number of persons under the rubble of a fallen building. And for hours on end the men struggled to dig through the bricks and the dirt to see if there were any survivors. They were just about to give up their search for survivors when a buried Scots lad summoned his last bit of energy to call out a message to those who had been digging and digging. "Heave away chaps...for I'm no dead, yet". And a bit of hope into troubled hearts...

And that's the message that comes on a day like this...bringing light into our darkened world. "Heave 'way, chaps...I'm no dead, yet". To me, it's a message of hope, of healing, of promise, of comfort, a message of faith in the future. "Alleluia". Christ is risen! Happy Easter.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive, O God, to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments that come now at the end of this Easter service.

May the message of Easter help us to rise above personal despair and discouragement. Let our voices rise above the voices of cynicism that may surround us out there in the world....as we remember once again the story of Mary and how she came to the tomb while it was still dark and left reassured by hearing the voice of Jesus call her by name. So may it be with each of us, that we may hear His voice speaking in our hearts....lifting us and sending us on our way....that we may be led to tell others tomorrow, "I have seen the Lord"....and yes, the ground is firm beneath our feet, and there is a guiding, shaping hand at the helm.

All of this in the spirit of the Risen Christ. Amen.

"WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK"

INTRODUCTION

My personal greetings to all of you on this Easter Day, and special greetings to those of you whom we don't get to see as often as we'd like to....

This is my 40th Easter sermon preached from this pulpit....no "re-runs" and no "repeats". And those of you who don't think much of my preaching now should have been around then....when it comes to sermons, someone once said to me....

"It's easier to create new life than it is to bring the dead back to life"....somehow that seems to tie in to Easter.....

Some Easters I remember quite well...like the one back in 1958.....I was really "up" for that service....a nice group of people here...about 100 or so and it was raining, too....I was "up" for it until the organ broken "down" right in the middle of the first anthem....the choir sat down as I stood up and had to take us the rest of the way without any music. We had a nice "sing along"....

Then there was the Easter six years ago when a lady came up to me at the door following the service...with a complaint....she said,

"It seems to me that every time I come here to church you're singing the same hymn, 'Christ, the Lord, Is Risen Today!'"

It was clear to me how often she comes since we only sing that hymn once a year...on Easter! But on to the Easter message....

I had about a