

“FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT”

Rev. Becky Stephens

Text: John 20:1-18, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 (NLT)

¹ Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!

His faithful love endures forever.

² Let all Israel repeat:

“His faithful love endures forever.”

¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and my song;

he has given me victory.

¹⁵ Songs of joy and victory are sung in the camp of the godly.

The strong right arm of the LORD has done glorious things!

¹⁶ The strong right arm of the LORD is raised in triumph.

The strong right arm of the LORD has done glorious things!

¹⁷ I will not die; instead, I will live

to tell what the LORD has done.

¹⁸ The LORD has punished me severely,

but he did not let me die.

¹⁹ Open for me the gates where the righteous enter,

and I will go in and thank the LORD.

²⁰ These gates lead to the presence of the LORD,

and the godly enter there.

²¹ I thank you for answering my prayer

and giving me victory!

²² The stone that the builders rejected

has now become the cornerstone.

²³ This is the LORD’s doing,

and it is wonderful to see.

²⁴ This is the day the LORD has made.

We will rejoice and be glad in it.

The story of resurrected hearts and new life begins early in the morning, just before dawn. In the stillness, in the darkness, Mary made her way to the place of death. Probably carrying spices to anoint Jesus’ body, she persisted through the darkness; persisted in doing the

necessary work of preparing him for burial. Her beloved One—the one who healed the sick, offered forgiveness of sins, and gave new life—was dead. And in the stillness, in the darkness, she made her way to a stone of shattered dreams and broken hearts.

Our Lenten journey has ended, and we have finally made it to Easter! Every year, we are asked to tell the same story over and over again; gaping tomb, confused mourners, unexpected and unbelievable encounters with angels and a gardener. Every year, the story moves us along from searching in sadness, to shocking disbelief, and finally to joy. And every year, we meet the challenge at the heart of Easter Sunday: to persist through fear and darkness, to believe beyond what we think we know, to welcome Christ in unexpected places and faces. Every year, we decide if we will allow our hearts to be transformed by the promise and the very presence of Christ. But it isn't just once a year that we get to decide. Every day, *every day*, you must decide whether hope is stronger than despair, whether love is stronger than death. That's what this story is about.

This is especially true this year as we navigate through fear and darkness with social distancing, sheltering at home and isolation. Fear and darkness is more real for some than others, but it is still present. I worry about women and men and children who are living in fear and darkness as they are being abused—physically, mentally, verbally, sexually, emotionally—during this time of quarantine where it's even harder to get help. I worry about our children who depended on the schools for food and nourishment and even, for some, their livelihood. I worry about the fear and darkness experienced by those in our nursing homes who don't understand why people aren't coming to see them. We have to persist through fear and darkness—and sometimes we have to persist on behalf of those who can't themselves.

Friends, this is an Easter to think outside the box. To believe beyond what we think we know. Maybe to see in new ways—with fresh eyes. And maybe, just maybe, we might recognize the Christ even in our midst in unexpected places and faces.

We get to decide if we will let our hearts will be transformed. Will we move through the fear and darkness? Will we believe beyond what we think we know? Will we welcome Christ in unexpected places and faces?

Some of you know this story of the resurrection so well that you could recite it by heart. Most of you probably know the general gist without remembering the details. And for a precious few of you, this may be the first time you have heard this story at all. There is one main point...RESURRECTION!

This is a story that has to be told and shared by every Christian like our lives depend on it—because they do! We have to share this story in a way that will bring those that still live in death to the hope of new life. We have to share this story not as a tale of the past, but of the

rising that is happening right now, right here. We have to share this story with our whole heart.

John 20:1-18 (NLT)

20 Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. ² She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

³ Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. ⁴ They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn't go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ while the cloth that had covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. ⁸ Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed— ⁹ for until then they still hadn't understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then they went home.

¹¹ Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. ¹² She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. ¹³ "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her.

"Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him."

¹⁴ She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. ¹⁵ "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him."

¹⁶ "Mary!" Jesus said.

She turned to him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for "Teacher").

¹⁷ "Don't cling to me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

My friends, maybe this is the story we share.

Mary Magdalene came with a broken heart to the tomb just before dawn in sadness and in grief to anoint her Lord's body and when the body wasn't there, she became frantic and ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple—the one Jesus loved. The two disciples ran for their lives, hearts pounding toward an empty tomb, and when they looked in the tomb, they found it empty. It was in that moment that they believed—confused, maybe—but went back to their homes "believing". Their lives were being transformed.

As Mary continued to weep, she bent down to look in the tomb and there, on either side were two angels who questioned her tears. “Why are you crying?” “Because they have taken my Lord,” she said. She answered the question. And as she turned to leave, she saw someone she thought was the gardener, and again, the same question was asked, “Why are you crying?” And then he added, “Who are you looking for?” She didn’t answer the questions, but asked if the body had been moved. All it took, then, was for Jesus to call her name, “Mary!” and she knew it was Jesus—the One who came in the name of the Lord, the One who healed the sick, the One who was her friend, the One whom she followed, the One who was her Teacher. The risen Christ had hung around the garden, so Mary wouldn’t be alone in her confusion and fear. Jesus loved Mary. Matter of fact, she is the first to be told to “go and tell.” Her broken heart became a burning heart. She left singing, “I have seen the Lord!” Her life was being transformed.

Remember that it’s in the darkness that the dawn of morning light comes. It’s in the darkness that we discover the stone has already been rolled away and the love of God has been let loose in the world. It’s not very hard at all to see the darkness in the world. The darkness is ever-present and is all too real for many of you. But this story affirms that resurrection has the power to transform a graveyard into a garden brimming with new life. Resurrection has the power to break open tombs and tear down walls. Resurrection has the power to transform the rocky wildernesses of our hearts into instruments of grace.

The resurrection of Jesus is not the ending of the story, but the beginning of many hope-filled risings to come. And because the Love of God will come, again and again, (and again!) to raise us out of death, we have hope. It just a whisper now, but if you sit in the stillness and the darkness, you can hear it calling you to rise—hope.

We turn our hearts with hope this day to meet the risen Christ with us, within us and within the love between us; within the unexpected that inspires us. We acknowledge that God is with us in our birthing, our living, our dying and our rising again. Then, like Mary, we must each decide whether hope is stronger than fear, whether life is stronger than hate, and whether love really is stronger than death...every day, every moment, with all our hearts. That is what resurrection is.

Christ is risen!
Christ is risen, indeed!
Thanks be to God!

Amen!