

“And Then It Dawned On Me”
Easter Sunday, April 1, 2018
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler, Pastor

Isaiah 25:6-9
John 20:1-18

When asked to choose my favorite between dawn and dusk, sunrise and sunset, you would typically find me favoring the sunset. I am just not an early morning person. Plus, in Leonia, you can only see uphill looking to the East, so the more dramatic lightshow happens when you're looking to the West, where the sky stretches to the foothills of the mountains. I live a block from the back entry to the Madonna Cemetery, and when we take our dog walking there at the end of the day we are often rewarded with an artist's sky, painted with great flair in purples, oranges, reds and yellows, as we meander on the paths through the gravestones, reading the names and what was remembered about them.

Where we left Jesus at sunset last night was in a graveyard too: Joseph of Aramithea and Nicodemus, two followers of Jesus, took Jesus' lifeless body and, according to Jewish burial practices, anointed his body with spices and wrapped him in linen cloths. They brought Jesus' body to a tomb in a garden where no one else had ever lain.

Do any of you remember how painful the dawn is after someone you love has died? If you are lucky enough to be able to get any sleep, your dreams may carry you to a place of peace and restoration. But then the dawn comes, and upon awaking the realization returns to you in an awful rush as you realize who, and what, you have lost. There is one dawn I remember that was like that, the morning I remembered and knew my life would never

again be the same. If I allow my mind to go there, my body can also conjure up the emptiness I felt in a physical way.

Perhaps for that reason Mary Magdalene went to Jesus' tomb while it was still dark-- so that she could preempt the pain of the dawn. Or maybe she never got to sleep that night at all, and weary of restless tossing and turning, she went to the place that was causing her heart's ache.

We know that Mary Magdalene and Jesus shared a special and tender relationship. Some speculate as to whether they may have been in love. A Hollywood movie was recently made about Mary Magdalene and it explores her character in greater depth, using material from our gospels but also from The Gospel of Mary, which was not included in our Bible. I would love to watch this movie; however, since its initial distributor was The Weinstein Company, now bankrupt in more ways than one, its release date has been stalled. Certainly Jesus recognized Mary in his time of ministry as a spiritual companion, and we know that she stood near the cross with Jesus' mother and aunt, also named Mary, as devastated witnesses to his execution. If it had been a funeral in our church, Mary Magdalene would have sat on the front pew with Jesus' closest relatives.

But that day has passed; a new dawn has come, and it is Sunday morning. Now we see Mary has returned to the tomb. The Greek word used in this passage for "tomb" is *mnemeion*, which means memory-holder, sort of like a "mneumonic" device -- from the same Greek root-- is something that helps you remember. Are there any musicians here that learned to tell the lines on the treble staff with this mneumonic device: "**E**very **G**ood **B**oy **D**eserves **F**udge" for E,G,B,D, F? And in Sunday School I was taught to remember the names of Paul's smaller epistles as "**G**eneral **E**lectric **P**ower **C**ompany" for **G**alatians, **E**phesians, **P**hilippians and **C**ollossians. And in Algebra, I learned to solve quadratic equations through the FOIL method: adding the product of the **F**irst numbers, plus the product of the **O**uter numbers, plus the product of the **I**nnner numbers, plus the product of the

Last numbers. I'm sure we have all used tricks to help hold space in our brains for things that are important to remember, and even more so if you are trying to remember things in more than one language!

So when Mary visits the tomb, she is trying to find space in her mind to hold the memory of Jesus. However, when she gets there she sees the stone has been removed from the tomb.

Her complaint almost reads, "They have taken Jesus out of my memory!" as she goes to find Peter and the beloved disciple. These two disciples saw the neatly wrapped linen wrappings of Jesus, and, John says, they immediately believed. So they went home.

But Mary stayed at the tomb-- her memory-- and wept. Maybe it took time for her to gather her wits enough to look into the tomb, but when she finally does, she sees two angels. When they ask her why she weeps, again she says, "They have taken my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." And then Mary turned around, "And she saw Jesus standing there."

Jesus is the second one after the angels to ask Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?" The grieving Mary could not grasp a promise the prophet in Isaiah had made so many years before: "And God will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; God will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken" (Isaiah 25:7-8).

Even though Mary was looking at Jesus, she couldn't see beyond the tomb, or memory-holder. Maybe her tears made her vision blurry. She thought Jesus was the gardener. *I'm assuming that meant he was wearing clothes*; countless curious people throughout the millennia have wondered what the resurrected Jesus found to wear after he discarded his burial linens. Since Mary saw this man and considered him ordinary in the garden setting, we can guess he was not naked!

But though this man was surely clothed, he was not ordinary. When Jesus calls Mary's name, she leaves the place of memories. Her mind and heart can finally make it outside of the tomb to see the life in front of her. It dawns on her that Jesus is alive.

And from there on out, Mary's life is never the same. But instead of carrying with her the dawn of despair, she carries with her the dawn that calls forth new life. And she does not keep it to herself. No, she goes forth proclaiming, "I have seen the Lord!" and telling others what Jesus had told her. There is even a legend that after Jesus' resurrection, Mary Magdalene moved to France and became a well-known preacher¹.

Where might the dawn be breaking through the patterns of despair in your life? What new life is God calling forth in you today? What might your lips proclaim to others about the good news Jesus presents to you? African-American theologian James Cone reminds us that "in the resurrection of the Crucified One, God could [change] defeat into triumph, ugliness into beauty, despair into hope, the cross into the resurrection." If God can and has done these things, what might God do in you?

I like to think of the communion bread and cup as our dawn. It is our moment of realization, our way of seeing and knowing, that Jesus is here with us. "This is my body, broken for you." When bread and wine dawn on us, we are once again with Jesus. Let us turn now to the table Jesus, the Risen Christ, has left for us. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia, Amen.

¹ Jan Richardson, "Easter Sunday: Out of the Garden"