

“Dawning of a New Day” – John 20:1-18

Are you a morning person? I am, especially now that I am up at 5:30 in order not only to read the papers but also to get to the gym for my cardio exercise. I love the early morning, mostly because it is an usually quiet time not counting the birds and an occasional car. Early mornings are a time of day that is calm, relaxed, a time when you can hear yourself think. Really early morning is even quieter, cloaked in the concealing and healing blanket of the predawn darkness. Predawn darkness is a different and special kind of darkness as well – it’s cleaner somehow than the tired, dirty and dusty darkness of the late evening and early night. It’s not quite as foreboding as the intense, inky darkness of the middle of the night, but instead predawn darkness has a trace of looking forward, a teasing hint of light to follow, a foretaste of the day that will unfold in mere minutes. Secrets of the previous day and night have been safely tucked away, and with the glistening of a freshly wiped slate a whole new day is kicked off, a day that will soon unfold with its own tales of tragedy and moments of joy. Predawn darkness is a special time. But never before or since was there a predawn darkness like the one into which Mary slipped on her way to the tomb, a predawn darkness into which joyous confusion erupted loud and clear.

“While it was still dark”, we are told, Mary slips noiselessly out of bed in the predawn darkness, careful not to disturb the others. They are all incredibly tired, exhausted beyond recounting with the tragic events of the last few days. They’ve talked long into the night and she’s dead tired, but still she can’t sleep. It’s no wonder she can’t rest, not with all the trauma of the last few days: the excited arrival into Jerusalem, that haunting supper, the wrenching drama of the arrest and trial. The images of the horrible crucifixion and the funeral of her beloved Rabbi, the teacher, the one who had so completely upset their lives over the past few short but exciting years are way too graphic to let her stay abed. Compelled by grieving love she is driven to go alone into the early morning darkness to touch his tomb, to somehow recapture the incredible feelings he evoked, to savour the memories of this Jesus who had seemed so different, so powerfully close to God.

Hushed quietly so as not wake the others she carries her shoes out the door into the deserted streets. It’s still dark, it’s that magical predawn darkness. Night sounds have ceased, but the raucous noise of the day has not yet begun. Here and there Mary hears the occasional muffled sound – a baby protesting this hungry start to a new day, the odd snore and grunt from the neighbour, the scritch of tiny feet as the last of the night creatures scurry for their protective hole.

She passes the gates, and outside the city even those noises have faded into nothing. It’s as if the whole universe is holding its breath, waiting for something important to happen. The still, deathly, quiet seems most appropriate as she hurries past the place of execution, so recently full of noisy pain and mocking shouts, hushed now with only the terrible echoes ringing in her mind. The trampled and bloodstained ground, the discarded cross, symbols of all their hopes and dreams that came to a horrible end with his death. Finally now she reaches the tomb, deathly quiet, no more laughter at the table, no more serious discussions, no more enjoying his teasing Peter, no more tears of joy as the lame walked and the blind could see. It is finished – he is in that tomb, dead, still, and quiet, and ... wait a minute! What’s wrong. Oh my God, one more indignity! The tomb has been opened! One more desecration! It is empty! Who could have done this? Why? Why couldn’t they leave him alone even in death?

A wave of helplessness washes over her. She feels so absolutely powerless, so totally alone. They, the huge, impersonal ‘they’ of the powerful, the politicians and the priests have

denied her even the comfort of these last rituals. Run, Mary, run! No more need for silence, no more possibility of quiet mourning, run and tell the others about this newest disaster! The pounding of her heart and the thudding of her feet now shatter the quiet of the morning. Consumed by grief, devastated by the desecration, fueled by adrenaline, she flies back through the stirring streets. “I must tell the others! What can we do? Maybe Peter can find out what happened! Why, oh why, oh why has this happened?” Not yet joyous, this was merely confusion!

We can only imagine the sense of hopelessness that came over her, but we can relate. I’m sure many if not all of us have suffered through times when everything had changed in an instant, when everything familiar had suddenly disappeared and all that was left was gut-wrenching confusion. Even if we haven’t experienced it directly, we have probably seen that same kind of terrifying confusion in the faces of others.

However, into the darkness of Mary’s distress, a darkness made even more confusing as the details became confirmed to her and to Peter and to the other disciple, into that darkness came the first flicker of a new dawn. Just as before the true dawn there is a short-lived surge of light, so too for Mary and Peter and the other disciple there was a brief illumination, a brief glimpse of what was to come. But it was still confusing, still they did not understand. So many questions flooding through their minds. “How can this be?! Who would bother to unwrap the body before stealing it? Who would have the time? Look, even the face napkin rolled carefully! Who ... why ...? That’s it, then, it really is now finished, we might as well go home!” And just as before the true light of the new day bursts forth, the darkness takes hold again for a moment or two. Peter and the other disciple trudge their weary way back into the city, despairing and defeated.

Unable to pull herself away, Mary remains, and looks inside, longing to see him, longing to have it all make sense. Ultimate sorrow, to match this ultimate indignity. Not even the presence of the angels is enough to disrupt her intent to do her Lord this one more service, to restore his body with dignity to the tomb. “Where have you put him? I must look after his body.”

And then, into her darkness, indeed into the darkness of the entire world bursts a new dawn, flooding Mary’s world with joyous confusion, and flooding the world with the glory and light of Jesus, the very light of the world. Dazzled by his appearance, blinded in the light of this new dawn, Mary fails to recognize the one she sought, until with one word, “Mary”, he calls her name, and the first of his sheep recognizes his voice. With one word, everything is changed, nothing is or could ever be the same. A new dawn has broken not just over that desolate graveyard but over the entire earth. A new dawn, illuminated by the glowing love of God now demonstrated forever in the resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. A new dawn, a new day, a whole new covenant in the demonstrated promise of reconciliation through Christ’s rising victorious over even death itself! The dawn not only of a new day but a whole new way of life, a whole new dimension in our relationship with God, a whole new way to find acceptance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation.

Run, Mary! Run again through the streets, this time not with unbearable grief but with the confusion of unfathomable joy! Run, Mary, as fast as you can and obey his command to tell the others: He is alive, you have seen Him, you have talked with Him!

And as the sun climbs higher in the morning sky, and the light of the new day comes brighter and brighter, so also the light of God’s love in Christ shone ever more brightly. Later that day, the light and warmth of Christ’s love washing over the terrified disciples as he appeared

to them huddled together behind locked doors. Soon even Thomas is reassured, as he adds the confirmation of touch to the sense of seeing for himself. The brilliance of Christ as the light of the world continues to shine past that new dawn, lighting up the lives of his disciples, as he joins them and eats breakfast with them on the shore. God's glory in Christ blinds Paul temporarily in a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus, but then lights the path to which he is then challenged by the risen Lord – a path and a life of dedicated service and proclamation.

What is perhaps the most beautiful part of this story is the grace and mercy of God's action in that new dawn, lighting up the world with the light of his Son, Jesus Christ, a grace and mercy made so clear through the tender call to Mary, the gentle "peace be with you" as he calmed his terrified followers, his gentle and accepting invitation overcoming Thomas' suspicion and doubt. The light of that new dawn was not the all-consuming fire so popular among some believers but was instead as soft as a sunrise over a Pacific atoll, was as gentle as the cooing of doves, as tender as the sunbeam poking down into the forest, as warming as the glint of sun on ripening wheatfields. The glorious light of Christ on that new dawn was not a glare of condemnation, but an uplifting ray of hope. He came to shine his light of God's love on his closest followers, even though in their joyous confusion they could hardly believe and accept the reality of his promises. He came to shine that same light of God's love on all who would accept its warmth, no matter how imperfect their belief.

And there lies the grace in this story for us, because Christ came to shine that same light of God's love on us. Sometimes we cower in dark corners, terrified that the full light of day will expose all of our faults, our shortcomings, our failings and our sins. It is a blessing to us, and a measure of God's grace that the light of love Christ brought into the world on that new dawn does not sear down like the glare of a police helicopter's searchlight, pinning us in our corner, but instead is more like the flashlight of a rescuer, gently finding us where we hide or feel trapped, rescuing us and helping us find the way back into the full and open light of God's presence.

A new dawn has come upon us once again. The dawn of a new Easter Sunday, this special day in our Christian year when we wrap ourselves anew in the old and familiar stories from the heart of our faith. As this day dawns we remember that dawn of a new light upon the earth, the light of God's grace, mercy and love shining so clearly in the risen Lord Jesus Christ. Let the light wash over you, and relish it. Let the light of this new dawn warm you, and energize you, so that you can, like Mary, heed Jesus' command to "go, tell the others." Let the light of God's love in Christ flood into your life, see clearly how you are forgiven, and accepted, and reconciled to God. Absorb enough of that light that you will start to glow yourself, and then in the power of the Holy Spirit help to bring others out of their darkness and into the light of God's love. It is a new dawn – arise, shine, for your light has come. Christ the Lord is risen, he has come again as the light of the world.