

"WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK"

**A SERMON BASED ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN
(20:1-18) AND PRESENTED FOR ORLEAN UMC
ON APRIL 12, 2020-----EASTER SUNDAY**

CHRIST HAS RISEN!

HE IS RISEN INDEED!

CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY!

ALLELUIA!!

**AS I WAS AGAIN READING AND STUDYING THIS
FAMILIAR TEXT FROM JOHN'S GOSPEL AND
PREPARING MYSELF FOR THIS
SERMON.....THERE IT WAS!!**

I COULD NOT GET BEYOND IT. IT DEMANDED THAT I ADDRESS IT IN THE SERMON. IT IS ONE OF THE MOST CRITICAL PASSAGES IN JOHN'S GOSPEL ---PERHAPS IN ALL THE GOSPELS AND IT HAD NEVER ---REALLY---CAPTURED MY ATTENTION IN THE PAST.....AND I DON'T KNOW WHY!-----THE WORDS WERE DEMANDING MY ATTENTION.

THE TEXT TELLS THE STORY OF MARY MAGDALENE GOING TO THE TOMB OF JESUS EARLY ON THE FIRST DAY OF THE WEEK, AND THEN THE TEXT SAYS, "WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK..."

**NOW----I KNOW IT WAS IN ALL LIKELIHOOD
MEANT BY JOHN TO BE ONLY A REFERENCE TO
THE TIME OF DAY, BUT DOESN'T IT OPEN OUR
IMAGINATIONS TO PERHAPS A DEEPER
UNDERSTANDING OF THE TEXT.**

**MARY HAD BEEN WITH JESUS ALL THE WAY. SHE
HAD SEEN LIVES MADE NEW, BODIES HEALED,
AND EYES OPENED. SHE HAD HEARD THE
COMPLAINING OF THE DISCIPLES AND THE
CRITICISM OF THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS..... SHE
SAW HOW THE CROWDS ADORED HIM AND THE
RULERS HATED HIM..... SHE STOOD UNDER THE
CROSS AS THEY KILLED HIM, AND HER HEART
WAS BROKEN.**

SHE HAD SEEN THE ADORATION OF THE PEOPLE WHEN THEY ENTERED THE CITY ON SUNDAY AND THEIR HOSTILITY WHEN THEY STOOD BEFORE PILATE AT THE END OF THE WEEK..... NOW IT WAS ALL OVER..... SHE MAY HAVE THOUGHT, "THE LEAST I CAN DO IS ANOINT THE BODY WITH SPICES. EVERYONE DESERVES A PROPER BURIAL.

HER HEART WAS HEAVY AND IN HER SOUL, "...IT WAS STILL DARK."

THAT EMPTY, FORLORN FEELING IS PERHAPS LIKE THE FEELING THAT POLITICAL CAMPAIGN WORKERS HAVE WHEN THEIR CANDIDATE HAS LOST.

**SOMEONE HAS TO GO BACK TO THE OFFICE AND
PACK UP THE STUFF..... OR A FOOTBALL TEAM
THAT HAS BEEN ELIMINATED IN THE PLAYOFFS.
THEIR SEASON IS OVER...NO SUPER BOWL FOR
THEM..... THE ONLY THING TO DO IS TO CLEAN
OUT THE LOCKERS AND HEAD HOME.**

**OH.....WHAT WILL WE DO NOW? -----PETER AND
THE OTHERS COULD GO FISHING; THEY COULD
START THEIR BUSINESSES AGAIN..... PERHAPS
WE COULD HAVE A REUNION IN A COUPLE OF
YEARS AND TALK ABOUT OLD TIMES.....**

ABOUT THE ONLY THING SHE COULD THINK OF WAS PERHAPS STARTING A MEMORIAL SOCIETY FOR A DEAD GALILEAN PREACHER..... SADNESS, DISAPPOINTMENT, AND EMPTINESS HAD BEEN HER COMPANIONS SINCE FRIDAY. IT HAD BEEN A GOOD THREE-YEAR RUN, BUT NOW IT WAS OVER.

LET'S FACE IT. WE ALL HAVE OUR DAYS WHEN WE STAND WITH OUR DREAMS IN SHAMBLES AROUND OUR FEET. OUR CHILDREN GO ASTRAY.... WE GET THE PINK SLIP FROM OUR EMPLOYER, OR WORSE STILL, THE TEST COMES BACK FROM THE LAB AS POSITIVE.

**THIS HAPPENS TO GOOD PEOPLE AS WELL AS
TO THOSE WHO HAVEN'T BEEN SO GOOD.**

**OR WHEN WE AWAKE DAY AFTER DAY AFTER
DAY ----STRUCK WITH THE STARK REALITY OF
A DEVASTATING AND DEADLY VIRUS THAT IS
SWEEPING THE WORLD AND CHANGING OUR
LIVES ---- PERHAPS FOREVER-----**

**"WHY ME, LORD?" WE SAY -----I GO TO CHURCH
WITH REGULARITY. I'M EVEN SECRETARY OF MY
SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS..... MY LIFE WAS GOING
SO WELL AND NOW THIS DARKNESS.**

WHAT WE MUST ALL LEARN, AND IT IS A VERY
DIFFICULT LESSON, IS THAT IT IS EASY TO
BELIEVE IN THE SUNLIGHT BUT VERY DIFFICULT
TO BELIEVE IN THE DARKNESS. IT IS EASY TO
BELIEVE WHEN LIFE IS GOOD, BUT WHEN IT
TURNS SOUR THE NATURAL INCLINATION IS TO
FEEL REJECTED OR GUILTY. ANYONE CAN WALK
IN THE SUNSHINE; ONLY THE FAITHFUL CAN
WALK IN THE DARK. IN FACT, IF YOU HAVE
BLOOD IN YOUR VEINS AND SKIN ON YOUR
BONES, YOU WILL HAVE SOME DARKNESS. NO
ONE HAS ALL SUNSHINE. REMEMBER ALL
SUNSHINE PRODUCES A DESERT, NOT A
GARDEN.

**HOWEVER, A CLOSE EXAMINATION OF THE TEXT
REVEALS SOMETHING HELPFUL. WHEN IT WAS
YET DARK...GOD WAS AT WORK IN MARY'S
BEHALF.... HE WAS MAKING A WAY WHERE
THERE WAS NO WAY..... HAVE NO DOUBT ABOUT
IT, WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH--AND THEY WILL--
IT DOES NOT MEAN THAT GOD HAS ABANDONED
YOU..... WHEN THE DARKNESS COMES UPON
YOU, GOD IS STILL WORKING IN YOUR BEHALF.
MARY DIDN'T LEAVE JESUS OR DENY HIM..... SHE
REMAINED FAITHFUL TO HIM WHILE WAITING
FOR THE LIGHT.**

WINSTON CHURCHILL WAS INVITED TO SPEAK TO A BOYS' SCHOOL IN ENGLAND DURING THE MOST DIFFICULT DAYS OF WORLD WAR II. HE SIMPLY SAID THESE WORDS, "NEVER GIVE UP, NEVER GIVE UP, NEVER, NEVER, NEVER." ----- AFTER THIS HE SAT DOWN. WHEN IT WAS REPORTED IN THE PAPERS, IT BECAME THE MANTRA FOR THE BRITISH PEOPLE DURING THE DARKEST DAYS OF THE WAR.

I HAVE BEEN A PASTOR LONG ENOUGH TO KNOW THAT THERE IS A HEARTACHE ON EVERY PEW AND THAT MOST OF US SUFFER IN SILENCE.

NO ONE IS IMMUNE TO HEARTACHE..... RICH OR POOR, WE ALL CARRY OUR OWN BAG OF ROCKS.

LET'S BE REAL ABOUT THE ISSUE WE FACE. THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM IS DEATH. IT HAUNTS US ALL. THAT IS WHY WE WATCH OUR WEIGHT, EXERCISE, TAKE OUR VITAMINS, AND SEE OUR DOCTORS WITH SOME REGULARITY. WE ARE RUNNING FROM DEATH.

I LIKE LEO TOLSTOY'S STORY ABOUT THE EVER PRESENT THREAT OF DEATH. I PARAPHRASE:

A MAN WAS RUNNING FROM A BEAR, AND TO GET AWAY FROM IT HE JUMPED DOWN A DRY WELL, AND HE CLINGS TO A SMALL TREE GROWING BETWEEN THE BRICKS ON THE SIDE, ONLY TO LOOK DOWN AND SEE A LION AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL WAITING FOR HIM. AND WHEN HE LOOKED TO THE TOP OF THE WELL, HE SAW A BEAR TRYING TO REACH HIM..... AS HE HANGS THERE BY THE SMALL TREE, KNOWING HE CANNOT STAY THERE FOREVER, HE SEES A RAT CRAWLING OUT ON THE LIMB HE WAS HANGING ONTO, AND THE RAT BEGINS TO GNAW AT THE LIMB.

DEATH IS A FACT OF LIFE AND WE MUST FACE IT.
WE CAN'T IN GOOD CONSCIENCE DENY IT AS
SOME WOULD HAVE US DO. EASTER AND THE
CHRISTIAN FAITH HAVE NO LIFE APART FROM
THE RESURRECTION. YOU MAY BE IN THE
DARKNESS ON THIS EASTER MORNING; DON'T
FEEL ALONE OR ABANDONED. YOU HAVE NOT
BEEN ABANDONED BY GOD.

LET'S EXAMINE JOHN'S WITNESS TO THE
RESURRECTION AND EXPERIENCE ITS MEANING
FOR OUR LIVES..... ALL ACCOUNTS AGREE THAT
MARY MAGDALENE WAS THE FIRST OF THE
FOLLOWERS OF JESUS TO GO TO THE TOMB.

THE OTHER THREE GOSPELS MENTION THAT SHE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY OTHER WOMEN. IT ONLY IS HINTED AT IN THIS GOSPEL..... BUT THE MENTION OF DARKNESS IN THIS ACCOUNT IS A PART OF JOHN'S APPROACH TO SHOW THAT THE RESURRECTION IS A GREAT LIGHT BREAKING IN UPON THE DARK WORLD.....

HE PLAYS DARKNESS CONTRASTED WITH LIGHT THROUGHOUT HIS GOSPEL. WHEN MARY ARRIVES AT THE TOMB, MUCH TO HER DISTRESS SHE FINDS IT EMPTY AND PRESUMES THAT THE BODY HAD BEEN REMOVED.

TOMB ROBBERY WAS NOT UNCOMMON..... SHE RUNS TO THE DISCIPLES WITH THE DISTURBING NEWS THAT THE BODY WAS MISSING. *ONE CAN ONLY TELL WHAT ONE KNOWS.*

THE FOCUS NOW SHIFTS TO PETER AND THE OTHER DISCIPLES--THE BELOVED DISCIPLE AND THEIR FOOT RACE TO THE TOMB..... THE BELOVED DISCIPLE, PRESUMED TO BE JOHN, PAUSES AT THE DOOR OF THE TOMB WHILE PETER BARGES IN. THE TOMB WAS EMPTY; AND THE GOSPEL NOTES THAT WHEN THE BELOVED DISCIPLE DOES ENTER THE TOMB, HE SAW AND BELIEVED.

**THE EMPHASIS NOW SHIFTS BACK TO MARY.
STILL WEEPING, SHE SAW THE GRAVE CLOTHES
AND REALIZED THAT THE POWERS OF HEAVEN
HAD BEEN AT WORK. SHE SEES TWO ANGELS;
THEY WERE PRESUMABLY SITTING WHERE
JESUS' BODY HAD BEEN..... SHE IS NOT
FRIGHTENED AND THEY INFORM HER OF THE
GOOD NEWS..... WHILE SHE WAS SPEAKING,
CHRIST SUDDENLY APPEARS BEHIND HER.....
SHE SEES THE OBJECT OF HER CONCERN, BUT
DOES NOT RECOGNIZE HIM.**

**JESUS COMES TO HER WITH GREAT LOVE AND
GENTLENESS.**

WE NEED TO REALIZE THAT IN OUR MOST
DIFFICULT SITUATIONS GOD IS WORKING IN OUR
BEHALF EVEN IF WE DO NOT KNOW IT AT THE
TIME..... HE IS WORKING TO BRING LIGHT AND TO
DISPEL OUR DARK SITUATIONS. THE GOOD
NEWS IS NOT ONLY THAT JESUS WAS RAISED
FROM THE TOMB, BUT THE CHARACTER OF GOD
IS REVEALED IN JESUS. HE IS LIGHT AND HE IS
ALSO LOVE.

THE ANGELS USED THIS AS THE PERFECT
OPPORTUNITY TO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS,
BUT THEY WERE INTERRUPTED BY JESUS
HIMSELF. WHEN MARY RECOGNIZES WHO HE IS,
SHE CALLS HIM BY THE NAME SHE HAS USED
FOR HIM: TEACHER, RABBONI.

IN HER DARKNESS SHE IS MINISTERED TO, AND
HER LIFE GOES IN A DIFFERENT DIRECTION
WHEN JESUS CALLS HER TO GO AND TELL THE
OTHERS.....

NOTE THAT HIS FIRST COMMAND AS THE
RESURRECTED CHRIST IS TO TELL A WOMAN TO
GO PREACH TO HIS DISCIPLES. SHE BECOMES
AN APOSTLE TO THE DISCIPLES.

WHAT WAS SHE TO PROCLAIM? SHE WAS TO
PROCLAIM THAT JESUS WAS ALIVE. HE HAD
BEEN RESURRECTED. DEATH WAS DEAD. DEATH
HAD BEEN DEFEATED. THE ELEPHANT IN THE
ROOM HAD BEEN KILLED.

**NO LONGER MUST WE LIVE IN DARKNESS. THE
LIGHT HAD COME. GOD IN JESUS HAD DEFEATED
SIN AND DEATH.**

**WHERE WE IN THE PAST HAD DONE EVERYTHING
TO HIDE FROM DEATH, SHE IS TOLD TO
PROCLAIM THE CURE FOR DEATH, THE
RESURRECTION OF CHRIST.....**

**WE TRY TO CAMOUFLAGE DEATH WITH
ARTIFICIAL GRASS AT THE CEMETERY, SLUMBER
ROOMS FOR THE DECEASED TO MAKE IT
APPEAR THAT THEY ARE NOT DEAD BUT
MERELY SLEEPING.**

**WE PUT MAKEUP ON THE CORPSE IN PREPARING
IT FOR THE VIEWING. BUT NONE OF THIS HIDES
THE FACT OF DEATH, NOR THE FEAR OF DEATH
FROM US.**

**WE DENY DEATH WITH OUR LANGUAGE TOO. WE
DO NOT DIE; WE PASS AWAY. WE DO NOT DIE;
WE CROSS OVER. WE DO NOT DIE; WE ENTER
OUR ETERNAL REST. WE DO NOT DIE; WE ARE
PROMOTED TO THE CHURCH TRIUMPHANT. AND
ON IT GOES.**

**WITH JESUS, WHO BY HIS RESURRECTION HAS
DEFEATED DEATH, WE NO LONGER HAVE TO
AVOID DEATH, FOR WITH THE RESURRECTION OF
JESUS, DEATH IS DEAD.**

IN THE WORDS OF JOHN DONNE, "DEATH BE NOT
PROUD...THOU HAS DIED." THIS IS THE
UNIQUENESS TO THE FAITH WE BEAR WITNESS
TO AS CHRISTIANS.

THE LATE ARNOLD TOYNBEE, THE NOTED
HISTORIAN, IN HIS *STUDY OF HISTORY VII* NOTED
SOME PARALLELS BETWEEN JESUS AND OTHER
SO-CALLED SAVIORS..... THIRTY-SEVEN OF
THOSE WHO CLAIM TO BE THE SAVIOR DIED
AFTER A TRIAL, BUT THAT WAS ALL. NO HINT OF
RESURRECTION. THERE IS NO HINT EVEN IN
GREEK MYTHOLOGY OF A RESURRECTION.

IN SHORT, THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS OF NAZARETH WAS A DISTINCT EVENT IN HISTORY WITHOUT PARALLEL. MOHAMED IS DEAD, THE GREEK GODS HAVE VANISHED, THE ROMAN GODS ARE GONE, STATESMEN, POLITICIANS, AND PHILOSOPHERS HAVE LOST THEIR CONTROL OVER OUR LIVES---ATHLETES AND CELEBRITIES COME AND GO.....

NOTHING COULD PIERCE MARY'S DARKNESS,
NOT GRAVE CLOTHES OR THE SINGING ANGELS.
BUT WHEN JESUS CALLS HER NAME, SHE
RESPONDS.

GOD IS PIERCING HER DARKNESS AND OURS. HE
NOT ONLY MINISTERS TO HER WITH
COMFORTING ANGELS, HE CALLS HER INTO
USEFULNESS.....

GO AND TELL THE APOSTLES!!!!

THE DISPELLING OF OUR DARKNESS DEMANDS
THAT WE TELL OTHERS IN ORDER TO COMPLETE
THE CURE!!!!!!

AS BELIEVERS, WE HAVE DIFFICULTY
ACKNOWLEDGING THAT THE SAME POWER THAT
ROLLED AWAY THE STONE THAT COVERED THE
MOUTH OF THE CAVE WHERE JESUS WAS
BURIED CAN ROLL AWAY THE STONES THAT
HAVE PLAGUED OUR LIVES. THE POWER OF THE
RESURRECTION WILL DISPEL OUR DARKNESS
AND ENABLE US TO LIVE RESURRECTION,
EMPOWERED LIVES.

I LIKE THE WORDS OF THE LATE AND
EXTRADORDINARY AUTHOR FLANNERY
O'CONNOR IN A *GOOD MAN IS HARD TO FIND*.
SHE HAS HER CHARACTER SAY,

**"HE THROWN EVERYTHING OFF BALANCE. IF HE
DID WHAT HE SAY HE DID, THERE'S NOTHING
FOR YOU TO DO BUT TO THROW AWAY
EVERYTHING AND FOLLOW HIM. IF HE DIDN'T,
THEN ENJOY THE MINUTES YOU HAVE LEFT THE
BEST YOU CAN."**

**CHRIST THE LORD IS RISEN TODAY. ALLELUIA.
ALLELUIA.**