

**+ John 20:1-2, 11-18 + Name of Wondrous Love—The Light¹ +
+ Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Dawn + 31 March 2013 +**

Have you ever traveled through a long, dark tunnel? If you've driven the mountainous highways of Pennsylvania or Colorado, you've run into a tunnel or two. What a feeling! It's almost scary as you leave the bright sun behind and enter that dimly lit tunnel. It's no wonder why some people get claustrophobic inside tunnels. How glad you are when you see the exit with its bright light beckoning in the distance, and even better, when you drive out again into the warm sunshine!

Lent is something like that tunnel experience. For six weeks, we were in the tunnel of Lent. The hours we've spent traveling with Jesus have been rather somber, solemn, serious ones. Even as those hours focused our attention on our Savior's wondrous names of love, they also drew our attention to our sins. They reminded us forcefully of God's anger over those sins and God's death for those sins. Those dark hours sent us home deeply aware of what we deserved from a holy God and what Christ suffered in our place.

...But today's different. Today we drive out of the Lenten tunnel into the full sunshine, the glorious light of Easter. For our joy, our comfort, our praise, today we look at one last blessed name of wondrous love—**THE LIGHT**.

That first Easter Mary Magdalene came early, ***“while it was still dark”***. Those words just about describe the condition of her heart too. Anyone who has lost a loved one knows how she must have felt. Loss, despair, and grief flood the heart with a loved one gone never to return, but Mary's darkness went even deeper than that.

Months before Jesus had cured her when he cast seven demons out of her. From that point on Mary followed him, serving him with full devotion and a heart full of faith in him as the promised Savior, but then came the dark hours of the past week. Not only was the sky over Calvary pitch black as she stood beneath the cross, so was her heart. Not only was the tomb into which they had hurriedly placed his lifeless body devoid of light, so was her spirit. How can we imagine the hopelessness, the despair that settled over her soul when they buried Jesus and with him all her hopes in him as the promised Savior? How can we imagine the darkness as she sobbed later to Peter and John, ***“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!”***?

Mary was in a tunnel without light, without an exit. No wonder the tears came as she stood by his opened tomb. Not only was her Savior dead, but she thought even his body had been stolen. How happy she would have been if she had found his lifeless form still in that tomb so she could finish preparing it, but now she was denied even that last labor of love. Yes, she came ***“while it was still dark,”*** not only in the sky but in her own soul too.

Do you know that feeling? Have you wept at a freshly filled grave or returned to a grave to weep again and again? Have you struggled with life, getting tired of its burdens and weary of its weight? Have you worried about health, loved ones, jobs, the economy, the future? Do your sins never seem to go away and your temptations always seem to win? Do you ever feel like you've been shoved into some tunnel without any daylight in sight? Then stick around as we follow Mary Magdalene from **dark night** into **gray dawn**.

Darkness must yield. It always yields, because dawn always comes. Every day it happens. So also that first Easter Sunday. As we look more closely at John's account, can you see the dawn coming, just a little gray light at first, but light nonetheless? In the first glimmer of light that day, Mary saw what she never expected—the stone rolled away from the tomb of her Lord.

If she would've just thought a little, Mary would've realized that the disciples would not crack open the master's tomb to steal his body. What would they gain by spreading the lie that Jesus was risen from the dead? Nobody would accept such a ridiculous story. Besides, she also knew the disciples were too paralyzed by fear to plan such things.

Thinking a little more, she would've realized that Jesus' enemies had nothing to do with moving the stone either. In fact, that's what they were trying to prevent. They had posted an around-the-clock Roman guard and sealed the tomb securely to keep the stone in place. They wanted Jesus to stay dead in that tomb so people could start forgetting about him and his claims. They wanted things to settle back to normal again.

¹ Some of the thoughts and language of this sermon were adapted with thanks from a 2013 Lenten sermon series by Pr. Em. Richard Lauersdorf and Northwestern Publishing House.

Yet the dawn had started. Easter light was beginning to shine in some darkened souls. Several faithful women claimed to have seen the risen Jesus, though few believed their emotional report. They reported angels at the tomb, not only shining in glory, but stating that Jesus was no longer dead. Soon others like Peter and the Emmaus disciples breathlessly reported news so wonderful it was almost unbelievable. Exit from the Lenten tunnel was in sight, because Easter light was starting to shine.

Do you know that feeling? Have you ever walked away from a worship service feeling good only to have life as usual dim the joy? Have you ever learned those Easter lines: ***"I know that my Redeemer lives, what comfort this sweet sentence gives,"*** (*Christian Worship* 152:1) only to wonder when it's your loved one who's being buried or your grave that's sneaking closer? Have you ever seen the Easter dawn only to have pain and problem, loss and doubt, like some dense fog shut out almost all of the Easter light? Then stick around as we follow Mary from **gray dawn** into morning's **glorious light**.

Dawn doesn't last long. It's only that short period between night and light. So also that first Easter day. Soon the glorious Son appeared and with him all his glorious light. In the dawn Mary had seen the stone rolled away and had run back to report her fears. Later in the daylight, she returned to weep at the tomb and told the angels the same story, but then it happened! As she wept, she turned and noticed a man standing behind her. Through tear-dimmed eyes she didn't recognize him, but when he said, ***"Mary,"*** her heart turned over. ***"Master,"*** she cried out in amazement. It was her Lord, her truly living Lord. She knew it was him. With amazing suddenness her tears were dried and the weight was lifted from her heart. All past sorrows were gone. Darkness had vanished. Now it was "My Savior lives." No more tunnel, just the bright light of Easter victory for her.

What a day that had to be for Mary and the others! What wondrous truths his resurrection brought them and brings us. No more can sin's guilt hammer us. Christ was crucified for our offenses and raised again for our justification. Yes, our guilt was laid on him, but his resurrection is proof positive that he paid for every one of those sins. By raising his beloved Son, the Father plainly showed Christ's payment for our sins was complete. No more can Satan defeat us because Christ has crushed his head. The Savior even descended into hell to proclaim his eternal victory over the old, evil foe. No more can death hold us. Christ entered his grave and exited to show that because he lives, we also will live. These wondrous truths, sealed by our Savior's resurrection, fill our days with glorious light, our lives with serving him, and our deaths with victory.

I pray that each of us here today can say, "Yes, I've not only seen the glorious light of Easter. I live in it daily." Easter's glorious light lifts us above our daily battles and puts a spring in our step. Easter's glorious light brightens our darkest day and keeps the smile of faith on our lips. Easter's glorious light shines down on our deathbeds and puts a light that cannot be extinguished into our graves. Long after our graves are forgotten and the etching on our gravestones has faded, this Easter light will still be shining. As long as the world stands, people of God like us will find their greatest joy in the risen Savior, who said, ***"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life"*** (John 8:12).

Let's leave that dark tunnel of Lent for the glorious light of Easter. Someday each of us will enter another tunnel, the dark tunnel of death. What comfort to know that at the end of that dark tunnel stands the risen Jesus, the One who truly is the Light of the world. What a day that will be when we'll join Mary and all believers in singing the eternal praises of Christ's amazing, indescribable, wondrous love. Amen.