

“Easter Eyes”
John 20:1-15, 16-18
Easter Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville
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I know you’re wondering why we stopped short.
We didn’t finish the text, but you know how this ends, right?
It’s a familiar story, the Easter story...no surprises today!
All of you know how this story ends.

And besides, any extra time I carve out for you right now lets you...
get on to your Easter brunch quicker,
or take your Easter pictures earlier,
or take that EASTER NAP sooner.

But the reason I stopped short is not your brunch or pictures or nap, and not that all of us know how this ends. I stopped short because I want us to remember how Easter begins.

Easter in the Bible does not begin with a congregation singing “Allelulia,” with musicians making beautiful music, with everyone in their Sunday best, all sunshine and light.

According to John, Easter begins in the dark.

John says that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb
“Early on the first day of the week,
while it was still dark...”

None of the other three Gospels begin Easter that way.
Matthew, Mark, and Luke say that the women went to the tomb...when?

“...at early dawn,”
“...when the sun had risen,”

In other words, at first light.
Only John says that it was STILL DARK.
See, John isn’t just making a chronological statement.
He’s making a THEOLOGICAL statement.

When John announces that Mary went to the tomb while it was still dark, John is describing the despair, the hopelessness that came to Jesus' followers and friends when he died.

I know it's Easter...but can you go there with me right now?

I recall a poem by W.H. Auden, "Funeral Blues".
Part of it goes like this:

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum,
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead....

He was my North, my South, my East and West,
My working week and my Sunday rest,
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;
I thought that love would last forever:
I was wrong..."¹

Auden wrote those words, but I think Mary Magdalene could have spoken those words. Mary is in mourning this morning, she's weeping outside the tomb.

THAT'S the reason I wanted to stop a little short with our text.
I want you to take a good look at Mary.
Take a look at her eyes, as she stands outside the tomb.
Can you see her eyes?

What's in her eyes?
Tears, right? Grief, confusion...

She's looking for the body of the dead Jesus, while she's talking with the risen Jesus, and she doesn't even know it's Jesus!

¹ As quoted in *Blue Nights*, by Joan Didion, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011.

Please...don't misunderstand.
 I'm not picking on Mary here.
 To the contrary...Mary's very presence at the tomb is a **COURAGEOUS**
 act!

Heck, all the men disappeared.
 They're back home, doors locked—**STILL HIDING in fear** when Mary
 leaves for the tomb that first Easter morning.

You see, when John says that Easter began in the dark, it tells us a couple
 things about Mary.

It tells us that she's in grief.
 And it tells that she was very brave.
 It took courage to go out in the dark.

Mary goes to see a dead man who did not die accidentally.
 Jesus was a condemned criminal!
 Do you think every Roman soldier will take kindly to this Jewish woman
 who wants to care for a crucified criminal's body?

And she goes alone.
 In all the other Gospels, there is more than one woman on Easter morning.
 Safety in numbers.

But in John's Gospel, Mary sets out, by herself...

Are you still looking at Mary's eyes?
 When you look at Mary's eyes, I hope you don't just see the grief, the
 confusion.

I hope you see the courage!

Now...let's finish the story.

¹⁶*Jesus said to her, 'Mary!'*
She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” ’

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Do you still have Mary’s eyes in your mind at this moment?
Now that Mary has recognized the risen Christ, what else do you see in her eyes?

Surprise? Astonishment?
How about joy?

I hope you see the joy in Mary’s eyes...

Sam Wells tells the story of a friend of his who went to medical school years ago. At the tender age of 21, this friend found himself in a delivery room for the first time in his life. He’d always assumed that giving birth was a somewhat painful experience, so he was very surprised that the mother entered the final stages of the birth screaming, “Joy! Joy! Joy!”

A couple hours later, with the baby safely born and the mother holding her new treasure, Sam’s friend had the chance to speak with the mom.

“I was so moved,” he said, “to hear you shouting for joy with all your heart.”
“You do have a lot to learn,” said the mother to the med student.
“I was shouting for Joy because I was in agony. Joy is the name of the midwife!”²

Let’s not be too hard on that med student. It’s easy for us to get confused about joy as well.

² Sam Wells, “The Discipline of Joy,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2011.

We tend to equate joy with whatever makes us happy at the moment.
With whatever keeps us comfortable at the moment.

But I'm not sure that's what the Bible means by joy.
What does EASTER JOY look like?
Look real closely at what happens when Mary realizes Jesus is alive.

Verse 17:

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Think about this!

What would Mary have wanted, more than anything else, once she knows that Jesus is alive?

She would want him to stay.

She would want him to return home with her.

And here's the risen Christ, telling Mary, I'm alive...AND I HAVE TO GO...

Put another way, Mary's grief PROBABLY DID NOT END with Easter.
More likely than not, she will still miss Jesus.
But that does not keep her from knowing joy.

We come to verse 18:

"Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'...now do you think she said that like this, all grim:

I have seen the Lord, but here's what he said...

No. Of course not.

Mary announced, "I have seen the Lord!"

She was joyful, even in the midst of sadness.

She was joyful, even though she had no clue now what the future would hold.

Can you see all that, in Mary's eyes?

The grief, the courage, the joy?

I hope so...because Mary's eyes are Easter eyes.

**What John invites us to do today—
in the light of Christ's resurrection—
is live with Easter eyes.**

One of the most famous pieces of music of the 20th century was written by a composer and organist named Olivier Messiaen. He composed a piece called "Quartet for the End of Time". It's an unusual piece, with irregular meters and rhythms...not at all easy for musicians to play.

Messiaen was a devout Christian, and this piece—like all of his work—was written not just to describe life, but to give glory to God.

As Messiaen once remarked, "I want to write music that is an act of faith about everything without ceasing to be about God."

What's remarkable about this piece is not just its beauty or its technical difficulty. It is the fact that Messiaen wrote it in a death camp. Stalag VIII, 1941. Messiaen was a prisoner in the camp, and one of the most prominent sounds in the camp was the rhythm of the JACKBOOT:

Hup-two-three-four,
Hup-two-three-four...

So Messiaen composed this wonderful piece of music in which the meters and rhythms of the quartet are irregular. It is a piece that stands as an act of defiance AGAINST the "Hup-two-three-four" of the Nazi regime.

In Messiaen's piece, the musicians cannot simply follow the beat...they must play in communion, they must listen closely to one another. In fact, on the score that he first wrote, it is said that in the places where composers would usually write "play slowly," or "play quickly"—

Messiaen wrote "play tenderly," "play with ecstasy,"

“play with love”...³

I want you to take a close look at the eyes of Olivier Messiaen in that death camp.

Can you see the sadness?
Can you see the courage?
Can you see the joy?

Easter eyes look out at the world,
and they trust that God is at work in this world,
even when we cannot see or prove that God is at work in this world.

Living with Easter eyes does not eliminate the darkness.
It transforms the darkness into something we can approach with confidence.

Do you remember how John begins his Gospel?
“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

When John tells us that Easter begins in the dark, he’s tying the end of his Gospel to the very beginning of his Gospel. And he’s asking us to be light for other people. Easter light! It doesn’t mean we eliminate the darkness...we cannot do that on our own...but we can, with God’s help, transform the darkness.

A hospital chaplain I know—a colleague and friend—once visited a person named Meg. Meg was 61 years old. In 1950, she had lost the use of her legs to polio, and decades later, she was suffering a relapse called “post-polio syndrome.”

The symptoms were nothing short of cruel:

Extreme fatigue, muscle weakness, stomach and neck pain...the list went on and on.

³ I first became aware of this story in a sermon from the Rev. Thomas G. Long, “Just...In Time,” preached to the Covenant Network conference gathering in November, 2005. Some additional information about Messiaen came through research on the web and from *The Lives of the Great Composers, Third Edition*, edited by Harold C. Schonberg, New York: W.W. Norton, 1997.

During one visit, my colleague asked Meg a question:

“What, if anything, sustains you or gives you hope?”

She replied, “I learn to say, ‘Hallelujah anyway. God, I’m going to praise you anyway even though sometimes I wonder if I really mean it, or feel like it.

“And I don’t know why I’m saying it except I know that you are real, and I want to be on your side though I don’t understand any of this, and I’m miserable and lost and confused, and all the Scriptures that I’ve ever read don’t make any sense right now.”

What my colleague says he remembers the most is the look in Meg’s eyes. It was a look that said, “I dare you to make sense of what I just said!”⁴

I want you to look at her eyes.
What look did she have?
You know...Easter eyes!

Easter eyes....

Now I don’t want to suggest that Easter eyes are simply a matter of will power, just get up in the morning and be in a good mood, just approach the world with an optimistic attitude.

That’s not it.

Easter eyes do not come to us because our will is so strong or our vision is so good or because we’re so skilled at what we can see!

We receive the eyes of Easter when Jesus SEES US.

Because Jesus has found us.

Because Jesus refuses to give up on us, even when we are lost, or in grief, or in the dark.

That’s what happened to Mary, right?

Mary’s vision, in those first 15 verses...it was clouded.

⁴ I am indebted to The Rev. John VanderZee’s sermon, “Doubt: The Seed of Faith,” preached at First Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Indiana, on April 23, 2006, for this story.

Clouded by the cruelty of Rome.
 Clouded by the death of her precious teacher and friend.

And what broke through that darkness?
 It was the sound of Jesus' voice, calling her by name!

Jesus said to her "Mary!"
 She said to him, "Rabbouni!"
 And Mary's world changed.

But not just her world.
 Our world too.

The good news at Easter is that just like Jesus called Mary by name long ago, so Jesus has called you. And Jesus will find you. And no matter what darkness you have lived through in your past or are going through right now, the risen Christ will lead you to where you need to go.

And like Mary, you and I are called to be witnesses to that truth...

One of my preaching professors in seminary, the best one I had, was a Baptist minister named Cleo LaRue.

A number of years ago, Cleo and his friend Scott Black Johnston—who is now the pastor at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in NY City—Cleo and Scott went to Cleo's home church in Austin, Texas at Cleo's invitation.

It was Mt. Zion Baptist Church, and Scott was excited.

Scott Black Johnston and Cleo LaRue had gotten their doctorates together, they had been classmates and became fast friends—but Scott had never heard Cleo preach outside the academic setting, never heard him preach in the African-American church that helped shape his ministry.

When they arrived that Sunday morning, a couple of BURLY DEACONS met them at the door, and they were immediately escorted to the office of the pastor, the Rev. G.V. Clark.

Cleo introduced the two of them, and then the Rev. Clark left, saying that he had to take care of a couple things before worship.

Cleo and Scott sat in the Rev. Clark's office, telling stories, catching up—but after a while, Scott got a little nervous. The service was supposed to start at 11am. And he could hear the choir singing in the sanctuary. And he looked at his watch—it was 5 MINUTES AFTER 11:00!!

Why were they still in the pastor's office if worship was already beginning??

Cleo saw his friend look at his watch, and he said, "Scott, you know what G.V.'s up to, right?"

"NO, I've got no idea."

"The service has already begun," Cleo explained, "but he's waiting until there's a good size congregation out there, until the CROWD is big enough—then he'll bring us in."

Then he said, "RELAX, SCOTT. **We're on Holy Spirit time now.**"

In Scott's words, he relaxed...he relaxed as much as a "Type A, we're on a schedule, Presbyterian like himself" could relax.

About 30 minutes into the service, they went into the sanctuary.

Scott was about to sit in one of the front pews to get a good view of his friend preaching, but the Rev. Clark proceeded to SEMI-ESCORT, SEMI-PULL Scott up to the pulpit area with Cleo.

After they sat down, Cleo leaned over to his friend and whispered, "Don't be surprised if G.V. asks you to bring a word."

"What?!!" Scott gasped, not really in a whisper.

"**Holy Spirit time,**" mouthed Cleo, back to his friend.

Sure enough, G.V. invited Scott into the pulpit. With nothing prepared, Scott says he rambled on for a couple minutes, with no idea whatsoever what he was saying, and then he sat down, relieved that FINALLY, he'd get to hear his friend preach.

But that's not what happened next.

What happened next was that the Rev. Clark invited anyone else present there to bring a word.

- A woman in the choir stood up and gave thanks for the birth of a healthy granddaughter.
- A young man approached the microphone to give thanks to the Lord for helping him get a job that week.
- Then one of the burly deacons came to the microphone.

“I believe I’ll testify,” he said. And he went on to tell the story of his son’s struggle with drug addiction, and how grateful he was that God gave his son the resolve, the determination to get clean.”

By the time the deacon was done, everyone—including Scott—was dabbing their eyes. Cleo looked over at his friend and raised an eyebrow at him—and he didn’t need to say it, because Scott already knew:

“Holy Spirit time...”

Leaving the sanctuary later that afternoon, Scott says he was AMAZED at how quickly the THREE HOUR WORSHIP SERVICE flew by! And how unusual it was compared to our Presbyterian tradition.⁵

In Professor LaRue’s tradition, EVERYONE was invited to testify about God’s activity in their lives—to PAY ATTENTION to ways that the risen Christ was at work, and then let other people know.

I was tempted for my first Easter sermon here, to call on a few of you and ask you to testify...I can see the PANIC on your faces, don’t worry, I’m not going to do it.

I am going to ask you a question:

⁵ As told by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, in his sermon “Can I Get a Witness?”, preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, February 26, 2012.

How did you get here today?

Did you get here by your wisdom, your insight, your plans and your power?

No...you know how you got here.

The risen Christ called you by name, out of your darkness.

Just like he did with Mary Magdalene long ago.

So...let Mary be your guide this Easter day.

Let your life be a witness.

Let Mary's eyes be YOUR eyes...

not fearing the darkness,

stepping forward with courage,

sharing the joy of the good news:

Christ is risen!

Alleluia!

Amen.