

## **John 20:1-18**

20Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup>So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." <sup>3</sup>Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup>The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup>He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup>Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup>and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup>Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup>for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup>Then the disciples returned to their homes. <sup>11</sup>But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; <sup>12</sup>and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup>They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." <sup>14</sup>When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup>Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." <sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup>Jesus 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.'" <sup>18</sup>Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

### **Bright Is the Light, and Warm Is the Day**

As many of you know I'm an old movie buff; when I was a young boy one of my hobbies was collecting old 8mm movies, particularly comedies. I would get catalogs from Blackhawk Films and read the descriptions of the movies and finally make up my mind on a purchase – the short films were usually around \$10. I had old Charlie Chaplin movies, Keystone Cops, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, W.C. Fields, and Little Rascals comedies. In adolescence my interest shifted to music, and I would spend all my time and money buying the latest releases by the popular rock bands, and gradually I learned that so many of the popular rock stars had gained their inspiration from old blues players, and many old blues players had been inspired by none other than God.

I want to play you a couple of clips by a blues musician known as Blind Willie Johnson, the first is called, "Dark Was the Night and Cold Was the Ground." This song is on a gold record that's currently over 12 billion miles from earth. A team at NASA selected this track, along with music by Bach, Beethoven, Stavinsky, artists from Asia and Bulgaria, because it so strongly expresses human emotion. Dark Was the Night and Cold Was the Ground is about loneliness and despair. As Carl Sagan says, "Johnson's song concerns a situation he faced many times: nightfall with no place to sleep. Since humans appeared on Earth, the shroud of night has yet to fall without touching a man or woman in the same plight." Well we know that we experience darkness in more ways than one. When

our adult son or daughter call to tell us that unfortunately they won't be able to join us for the holiday, when our supervisor calls us into the office and says that the company is downsizing and your services will no longer be needed, when the doctor calls you into the office to go over your test results informing you that you have cancer and what your options are, when the person you've been married to for fifteen years says, "I no longer love you." We know what darkness is without having to sleep on a cold ground. Our Gospel lesson, our Easter story begins in darkness, as Mary makes her way to the tomb of one she loved dearly. Mark writes that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary – I'm not sure what that might have looked like, but seven demons sounds like a lot to me, enough to shroud this poor woman in a veil of darkness. Jesus had brought her out of that darkness, and Mary was probably Jesus' greatest fan. She must have come to Jerusalem with the rest of Jesus' followers with high hopes and great joy only to have it squashed under the weight of a wooden cross. From a distance Mary had watched Jesus die slowly, painfully, and her joy and hopes must have died along with him. She was likely numb from grief.

And now, as if things couldn't get any worse, she finds that the stone has been removed from the tomb. It's horrible to lose a loved one, but for someone to take the body just adds insult to injury. It compounds the darkness that already surrounds her soul. She runs to tell her friends, Jesus' disciples. John and Peter seem to be competing to see who will reach the tomb first, and when they do they go inside. The body was gone; all that remained was the linen in which the body was wrapped. They go home and leave Mary there, outside the tomb, weeping. Dark was the night, and cold was the ground.

Then Mary peers inside the tomb, perhaps hoping beyond hope that Peter and John had missed something, that the body was still there, just moved but not stolen. Somewhere inside her, the light of hope was kindled slowly like the breaking dawn, which cast light on two figures inside that tomb, dressed in white. "Woman, why are you weeping?"

*"They, someone, has taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have laid the body." I need to know where the body rests, so at least I can visit his place of rest, at least I can leave flowers there, at least I can pray there, and keep it clean and neat, and somehow show him how much I loved him.*

She turns around and sees a gardener, who asks her the same question as the men inside the tomb; "Woman, why are you weeping?" Assuming that this man has removed the body from this tomb, she asks hopefully where he has laid it. Her only aspiration, her only hope at this time is to locate the corps of the man she had loved so much. That was the most she could hope for.

Despair is a condition of low expectations. Life can beat us down if we're not careful; we may lose our health and our wealth, we may lose our husbands or wives, our mothers and fathers, or sadly our children. And the grief we experience can paralyze us, lead us to drinking or drugs, or to locking our doors and turning on the television and tuning out the world. To Mary Magdalene's great credit, the death of her Lord had not completely overwhelmed her. She had come to the garden early that morning, in the darkness, to find Jesus, the way that we too, in our darkness, come to seek Jesus. It is the darkness itself that causes us to search for Jesus. Despite all the messes that life can throw at us, all the chaos and calamity, there is a Spirit within us that fights to keep hope alive, and in the midst of this darkness we come upon the Risen Christ who calls us by name. "Mary." "John." "Carol." We don't come to this church to affirm some creed that we believe that this man named Jesus who was crucified nearly 2000 years ago rose from the dead on the third day; we come to find the Risen Savior. We come to find Jesus, and we come to hear him call our name. We come to share the joy in knowing that death and darkness do not get the last word, but that however dark the night, a light still shines, and it shines on

us. Blind Willie Johnson, the man who composed that song, “Dark Was the Night and Cold Was the Ground” was known by another name; he was known as the Rev. W.J. Johnson and preached at The House of Prayer in Beaumont, Texas. The Rev. W.J. Johnson also wrote this song, one of Team Bethel’s favorites – “Let your light shine on me.”

Jesus says that he has come that we may have life and have it abundantly. That doesn’t translate into a life without pain and suffering, a life without tragedies and heartaches. It’s a life that contains the good and the bad, the joy and the sorrow, but a life that is always illuminated by the light of a Risen Savior who knows us by name, a Savior who has been there and done that, and one who lives within us, and promises never to leave us. Rev. Johnson sang “Dark *was* the night, cold *was* the ground,” but because we serve a *RISEN* Savior, the light is always shining on us.