

John 20:1-18

“A Quiet Dawning”

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Ames UCC

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Early 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. 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.’ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 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. 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.’ When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ 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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means Teacher). 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.” ’ 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.

I prepared this sermon as I was sitting in my office here in the church. My office is sometimes a challenging place to get any writing done, because it can be noisy.

There are usually conversations going on in the main office, telephone interruptions, people coming and going, and, right outside my window, the children from the child development center shrieking and laughing and shouting as they play on the playground.

But not anymore. These days, the offices and the playground are empty, and it is as quiet as a tomb here.

And, now, here I am in the sanctuary, and it's Easter, when there would normally be a crowd of people with the rustling of bulletins, the crying of a baby or two, and, from Balcony Church, the noise of children clomping around and dropping pencils on the wooden floor and *whispering* to one another.

But not today: today, I'm preaching in an empty sanctuary. It feels so strange and wrong, and yet—this may be a whole lot more like that first Easter.

As we begin the passage in John, it's very early in the morning, and Mary Magdalene is all by herself in an empty cemetery. The sun isn't up yet, so she doesn't see until she's right at the opening of the tomb that the stone is gone. She has no one to turn to for help, so she races back to tell Simon Peter and the other,

unnamed disciple, that Jesus' body has been stolen; and they run back with her to the tomb, look around, and see the grave clothes lying there. In seeing this, we're told, the unnamed disciple "believes," but what he believes is what Mary Magdalene reported—that Jesus's body has been taken away, not that he's been raised. So the two men quickly get out of there and go back to where they were hiding before.

Mary, though, stays behind, alone once again. And as the dust settles from all that frantic activity and silence descends, she looks back into the tomb and sees two angels. "Why are you weeping?" they ask. And Mary says, again, what she believes to be true: "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him." Then, she turns and sees Jesus.

Only, she doesn't really see him through her tears, because when he repeats the angels' question—"Why are you weeping?" and then adds, "For whom are you looking," she thinks he is the gardener. Until he quietly says her name: "Mary!" and she turns and recognizes him.

I wonder if he's been there all along, just standing there, trying to get through to her. I wonder if he's been calling her name the whole time, but it's only now quiet enough for her to hear.

For all of us, this has suddenly become a quieter time, though we're experiencing it in many different ways. I've heard from some of you that sheltering-in-place is exactly the break that you and your family needed from the demands of your over-scheduled lives.

For others of you, though, the demands haven't gone away—they've multiplied, as you've tried to do the same amount of work from home but using unfamiliar technological platforms, while also doing full-time parenting and homeschooling.

For others, there has been no staying at home. Instead, you've had to drive through nearly-empty streets to face the dangers of daily contact with patients or with customers, knowing that the virus could strike you any day; and you've had to make hard decisions in order to try to keep your family safe—sequestering yourself in a separate part of the house, or even sending your children away to relatives.

And for those of you who live alone, this has been a time of near-total isolation, unable to leave your home, or even your room.

But, no matter how this pandemic is affecting each of us, we are all, suddenly, living in a quieter world than before, as nearly our whole society has come to a standstill.

Like the quiet in which Mary heard Jesus call her name, and turned toward him. That wasn't a physical turning, by the way: she had already turned to look at him, back when she thought he was the gardener. This was a psychological turning; a change in her understanding. What changed was suddenly knowing that the one she'd thought was dead was fully alive and calling to her. And with that knowledge, the impossible was suddenly possible again—a world transformed from hopelessness and death and division into one of life and love and belonging—not just for her, who had remained steadfast and faithful, but even for the disciples who had denied him and run away in fear.

“Don't cling to me,” Jesus says, because he's not hers to own or control. Instead, as Frances Taylor Gench points out, she is to go and tell the others that “a new relationship with God is [now] available. ‘My Father’ is now ‘your Father’; ‘my God’ is now ‘your God’; and Jesus’ Spirit now unites believers to him and to one another as ‘brothers and sisters.’”¹

What began in the crisis of death changed everything to a world of life. What about our own crisis of death? What changes might it bring about, if we can hear Jesus call *our* names?

¹ Frances Taylor Gench, *Encounters with Jesus* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2007), 132-133.

Even now, we can see that unimaginable behavioral change is possible on the turn of a dime when we know that our lives are at stake. In just a few weeks of shutdown, the skies are clearing over China and India, New York and L.A. Now that we know what's possible in the short-term, what long-term changes can we make to save not just our own lives, but the lives of future generations of humans and every kind of creature?

Within a period of a few, short weeks, a seemingly-gridlocked Congress has passed a flurry of legislation to protect small businesses from ruin and laid-off workers from devastation and eviction. Now that we know such things are possible in the short-term, perhaps we might raise our expectations for the long-term, so that the privileges of the few, like reliable healthcare and living wages and secure housing, can become the day-to-day reality for everyone.

And in the seeming blink of an eye, social customs we'd thought had gone by the wayside—phone calls and cards, running errands for neighbors—have suddenly become the new normal again, as we've hungered to see the faces and hear the voices we had started to take for granted.

This is a graveyard time. A time of death, and the weeping isn't over yet. But when it begins to lift, will we go back to the same soul-crushing, dog-eat-dog, business-

as-usual that we had before? Or has this time of sudden quiet helped us to heed another voice, and turn in a different direction? That's my hope.

“Don't cling to me,” Jesus said to Mary, and we shouldn't either—we shouldn't cling to hard and fast ideas of *where* he may lead us, because he *is in* the lead, not us, and his vision is so much bigger than ours. Instead, now that we've been given the chance, in the sudden silence, to hear him call our name, we must go; because there is a world in tears just waiting to hear the amazing news that he is not dead and they are not forgotten or abandoned; but that, instead, every good and joyful possibility is alive once more, for them, for us, and for all the world.