EASTER SUNDAY

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*Woman of the Dawn* Psalm 118

 John 20:1-18

As we just heard the psalmist proclaim: *This is the day that the Lord has made; let us (indeed) rejoice and be glad in it!* [v. 18]

And yet, it is also important to remember that Easter day—especially that first one—did not begin in the radiant glow of sunshine like the beautiful day we have outside right now. As we heard the gospel lesson, the first day in Easter, the first Easter Sunday began in darkness and sorrow, just as it had been on Good Friday.

The different gospel writers do not agree about the number or identity of the women who crept out that early morning. They do, however, agree that it was the first day of the week, and that in the pre-dawn darkness, it was *women* who braved that journey to the tomb.

As we just heard, the Gospel of John remembers only Mary of Magdaline as being the first and only one to visit the tomb. Once there, she finds the unexpected: she finds the tomb open…and empty.

Excited and confused, she hurries to tell two of the other disciples—Peter, and the disciple whom Jesus loved. At this point, they, too, brave the darkness and rush to the tomb. Each of the men take a turn looking into the emptiness. The gospel writer says that each saw the linen wrappings but no body, and upon seeing, they believed—and then they left.

That is fine, but we are not told *what* it was that they believed. Did they believe that Jesus had risen? Or was their belief only that Mary’s information was correct? I am inclined to believe this was as far as any of them were able to go at this time, and I say this because of what happens with Mary as she lingers there beside the empty tomb.

She is not comforted by the absence of Jesus’ body. She is still confused and distraught. John tells us that as she stood there weeping she finally took it upon herself to look into the tomb. However, unlike the two other disciples, Mary does not see the folded grave linen the others saw. Mary sees angels—two of them. She hears them speaking to her, asking why she is weeping.

Often, when we hear Mary being asked this question—by the angels, and then again by the Risen Christ—we think of them asking her with knowingness, with a kind of knowing irony. We tend to hear it this way because we know, and the angels know, that Jesus has risen.

 However, just for the moment, let us hear the question as a real one. Let us

hear them asking their question out of a real concern for Mary’s heartbreak and feelings of anguish and grief.

Before we allow ourselves the joy of a bright Easter morning, let us consider when and where Mary was in this moment of the Easter story. She was still in the half-light of dawn. The sun will continue to rise and illuminate the world around her. However, in this moment, she is still in darkness; still in a place of unknowing and sorrow.

What I want us to consider is that this place of sorrow and loss is a very familiar place for human beings, really for all human beings. We encounter it all of the time. As we grow older, it becomes even more familiar to us as loved ones begin to die around us. Weeping and loss, darkness of the heart and spirit become recurring emotions.

One of the commentators I read, the Rev. Scott Hoszee, had this to say about Easter: *Easter does not happen in a bright, airy, and decked-out-in-white church sanctuary.* *Easter happens where death is, because that is the only place it is needed.*

What he meant is that Easter happens because Jesus knew that he and Mary both needed all the tears we can find and will shed if the truth of the resurrection was going to come to mean exactly what it still means: that God has brought hope to us in the very face of death; that we have the hope of new life exactly where we need it most: in the midst of a world full of death and dying.

We need to shed tears over the loss of human life—even when the end of this life is a blessing—because it is an important comment on the meaning of life; the meaning of one person’s life to us, the meaning of all life to us.

Our tears and sorrow and grief are a way of standing in the midst of this life and proclaiming it good. It is our way of declaring that—whether it is to sickness, or injury—death *should not* and *will not* have the last word on human life and meaning.

If it did then death would conquer us all and life would have no meaning. What Jesus’ and the angel’s question to Mary takes into consideration is all that she has witnessed, all of the violence she has seen, all of the anguish she has felt, and all of the tears she has wept.

In response to all Mary has suffered, indeed, in response to all the suffering and grief every last human being has and is suffering even now, Jesus and all the angels turn their face toward us even now to see our tears, to hear our cries, and to extend words of comfort and words of life in the very depths of our sorrow.

What the Risen Christ’s question is saying is that Mary’s suffering is important. It is saying that her sorrow is seen by God.

In the very next moment, when Christ says her name, Mary suddenly knows that death has *not* had the last word about him. God is having the last word. God is responding to the shade and darkness to which death would consign us.

What is more: Christ and the angels continue to ask this question of us—why are you weeping?—because it is an important question to remember and to ask of ourselves and of each other:

Why are we weeping?

Why are the families of the war dead weeping?

Why are those who love the land, the air, and the waters of the earth and everything in it—why are they weeping?

Why are the hungry weeping?

Why are the physically abused weeping?

Why are the differently abled among us weeping?

Why are the differently oriented among us weeping?

Why are the refugees and immigrants weeping?

Why are we all weeping?

We know why *we* are weeping. We even know why *others* are weeping. It is not only because they are experiencing the death of something or someone in their lives. It is because we either do not see their tears or refuse to believe that they are worth our trouble.

What Jesus’ resurrection tells us is that God’s love sees every tear each of us sheds over the death and suffering of ourselves and each other. God sees our tears and cares about bringing us comfort and wholeness—even in the face of death itself. God sees our suffering and offers us God’s whole attention—just as Mary Magdalen received all of Christ’s attention as she stood beside his empty tomb.

As the sun continued to rise all around her, Mary, this woman of the dawn, heard Christ call her name and she knew he had risen to new life—just as she and the others would rise to new life and new hope.

What is more, Mary now knew that it must be her and the others who would make this good news known in the world. This is what the light of Easter brought into her life and the life of all others who believe in the love of God. What we now know is that God’s love is stronger than fear, stronger than hatred, stronger than doubt, stronger than violence—even stronger than death.

And just as the psalmist wrote more than three thousand years ago let us also say today:

*“God’s steadfast love endures forever.”*

*God is our strength and our might and has become our salvation.*

*This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it.*

*Let us thank God that God have answered and become our salvation.*

*This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.*

And let it truly be so. So that when we see the tears of others and remember how God sees ours, and let us respond with compassion. Let us bring their claim for comfort and justice to the forefront of our lives and actions. Let us listen, with Mary Magdalene, that even in the half-light we might see something new and hopeful. Let us listen in case we hear *our* name being called by the voice of love.

Again, in the words of Rev. Hoezee:

*Somewhere in the shadows of your life and my life, a truly risen Savior is lurking, bursting with new life.  You see, the darkness of this world does not need to lift completely in ways no one could miss for the truth of Easter to be available.  It’s here.  It’s now.* **He’s** *here,* **he’s** *now.*

*And he knows your name just as surely as he knew Mary Magdalene’s name and burst Easter into her heart the moment he called that name to her.* **Mary.***No matter how deep the darkness of your life may seem, listen for that voice calling your name. Because he is calling.* Mary.  Ann.  Keith.  Lori.  Mairi. Howard…and all of us. *Listen.  Listen for that voice.  Listen and then start living Jesus’ new life right now.*

Amen.