

April 12, 2009  
John 20:1-18

Helena, Montana  
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Dear Friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace this Easter Day!

I'm Pastor Loren Gustafson and on behalf of the entire ministry team of Our Redeemer's, I extend a warm welcome to each of you! We pray for the power and blessing of God to fill you and bless your Easter celebration. Thank you so much for being with us in worship today!

The season of Lent is past, winter is behind us, days are rapidly gaining in length and spring is here. Ahh spring! Spring is the season when rational thinking and rational planning are blown by the wind. The death and decay, the gloom and the darkness, the depression of autumn and winter disappear. It makes no sense, really, but life suddenly explodes when tiny roots take hold and throb with life. They gain the strength to break apart whole boulders as they send forth shoots and flowers to blossom in the light of a new day.

Easter! Easter is the announcement that defies all rational thinking and practical planning and cautious pragmatism. Christ is risen! Christ is alive! Easter is the reminder that God's truth is far greater than our faith. Our anxiety is all for naught, our deepest darkness of our lives is suddenly bathed in the light of Christ. The cold and frozen reaches of our souls are surprisingly warmed by the brilliant light of Christ. We are filled with new life and enriched with abundant grace. This, at least, is the hope of Easter.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb..." So begins the Easter Gospel for this day. The story begins in darkness. And a few verses later we have a description of Mary's emotional state of being when the bible records: "But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb." For those who are waken in the middle of the night by fears and anxiety, the reality of the darkness is most stark.

During this past Lenten season I have been reflecting on a short devotional book by Parker Palmer.\* Toward the end of the book is a reflection he titled "Out of the Shadow and into the Light." In plain and simple language he speaks of the monsters that invade our lives in the darkness. Like monsters that appear in our dreams, we must wrestle with them and overcome them in order to step into the dawn of a new day. If we are to be able to truly celebrate the Good News of Easter and to step boldly into the brilliant light of this new day, we must first ride out the monsters of darkness. Given the world crises that are affecting all nations, and the financial insecurities that keep appearing in new forms, there are monsters galore that need to be defeated.

Have you faced the monster of insecurity? Ask yourselves, where has our confidence gone? When it appears in the news that huge institutions that once were the foundation of our economy have been built not on solid ground but on shifting sand, it spreads insecurity like a plague. Like a virus it infects our individual lives. We are not so certain. We are not so secure as we thought we once were. We question our decisions and our plans for the future. How can we pay the bills? How will we get the kids through college? How will we live in retirement? We just don't know what to think or what to believe anymore. We are unsure of ourselves and the monster of insecurity glares in our face.

Hostility is a monster that raises an ugly head when times get tough. It's as if the whole universe is suddenly a battleground. We start employing the language of warfare- especially at our work place, when we talk about our "tactics" and "strategy" for survival. We must gather allies on our side to be prepared to face the enemy, whether the enemy is our competition or our own employer.

Unfortunately, life is full of self-fulfilling prophecies. Instead of working cooperatively and helping one another through the difficult times, we think life is a battle to be fought and anyone who isn't for us is against us. We become more and more competitive and we fear losing the battle. We act as if we are at war with everyone and the dark monster of hostility wears us down.

I was following a truck down Euclid Avenue the other day and at the stoplight I could read the bumper sticker on the tailgate: "Join The Dark Side." There was no logo and so I sat there and pondered what it could mean. Was it a slogan for dark beer? Was the driver in favor of straight coffee without cream or sugar? I'm hoping it is something like this rather than an invitation to join the evil forces of darkness that are pitted against the Light of Christ. The monster of atheism seems more prevalent in our society than ever these days and that bumper sticker made me fearful. People want to emphatically reject God and claim that "me, myself, and I" are really the center of the universe- not God. This evil monster of conventional atheism convinces us that life is all about me. Such a monster can wear us down until we collapse in burnout, depression and despair.

A close relative of atheism is the "denial of death" monster. While some of us are all too quick to kill off responsibilities, relationships and even ideas well before their time, others live in constant denial of the realities of life and death. We hang on to the past in deep denial of change or growth. We want to preserve things the way they were with such vengeance that we paint ourselves into the corner. We cling to the darkness when we cling to the past with eyes shut tight against the light of a new idea or a new way of doing things. Perhaps it is the fear of failure that prevents us from moving on to a new day and a new way of life.

A final monster on this short list is fear. And oh there are so many things to be afraid of today. We can spend our whole night tossing and turning for the fears that would invade our minds and play games with us. But now it is morning and the light of a new day brings hope and promise in a new way.

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb..." So declares the Easter Gospel. The shadows of all the deepest fears and anxieties as well as the monsters of the darkness hung over Mary as she made her way to the tomb. It was as if the world had stopped turning on Good Friday and the sun had ceased to shine. The death of Jesus Christ was the most powerful and sinister darkness that the world had ever known. And now it was the third day. It was a Sunday. It was the first day of a new week, the dawning of a new age, the break of dawn of a light greater than the world had ever known.

From the depths of deep darkness, Mary was able to step forth into the dawn of a new day. She was confronted head on with the brilliant light of Christ on Easter Sunday and all darkness was washed away. And so “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.” And Mary stood defiant against the demons of darkness as the light of Christ burst forth.

The black hole of personal anxiety and insecurity is filled with the light of Christ and desperation is suddenly washed away. Darkness is dispelled quickly when we realize that our identity does not depend on the job we hold or the role we play or the power we think we might have in the work place. Rather, our true worth depends on the simple fact you and I are children of God, and if children, then we are heirs in God’s will.

Slowly it dawns on us, we are not destined to continually fight the battles of a war torn world. Rather, we are pilgrims on the journey toward transformation. While we still live in this world we are not destined to be held captive. We are inheritors of God’s grace and the salvation that was won on that first Easter Sunday is the gift of new life that is given to us again this day.

The burdens of this world are not singularly our responsibility. It is not up to us to save the world because Christ has already accomplished that feat. You and I need to be reminded that when the monsters of this world have climbed upon our shoulders all at once, that we are free to lay down the load. Quickly we learn that there are others to help us. Together we can share one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ. We are part of a family and of a great community in Christ where we are liberated from the isolation of darkness and we are welcomed into the light of a new day.

Darkness still covered the earth at the early hour that Mary Magdalene made her way to the cemetery. Filled with grief and sadness and accompanied by all the fears and anxieties and burdens that one could imagine, she trudged on in the dark, waiting, wondering, hopeful, expectant, yet still filled with fear. Like Mary, all of us have places of darkness in our lives. All of us, if we be honest with ourselves, still allow fear to get the best of us. But fear cannot hold us. Grief and despair must run their course.

For today is a day to celebrate good news and the fact that there are other seeds of truth planted deep in our souls that are just now breaking forth into the light of a new day. Seeds of hope, seeds of trust, seeds of faith, and seeds of grace have been imbedded into our lives and now the brilliant light of Easter calls them forth from the dark. Today is Easter Sunday! It is the dawn of a new day and the dawn of a new season of faith in our lives.

Listen and hear the Good News of Easter proclaimed in word and song and prayer and preaching this day. Christ is alive and Christ grants light and life to your life and to my life this day. Darkness is defeated. The light of Christ is present.

As a benediction to this Easter message, I share the hopeful proclamation declared for us by our

ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark Hanson of Chicago.\*\*

Bishop Hanson writes to us:

“Jesus lives and resurrection hope beckons. Jesus’ resurrection on the third day signals that God is not finished until the life of Jesus renews the whole creation. Sinners once haunted by the threats of judgment will live forgiven, restored, renewed and freed. All lives broken by sin’s injustices and haunted by death’s terrors will be transformed by joy and transfigured into the new creation in Christ.

“You and I are witnesses of this new creation. You have been baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection and have heard his promise. Your lives are hidden in his and he feeds you with a foretaste of the eternal feast of joy. He will meet you in your hope. He claims your daily work and makes it into a holy calling. He lives in you and sends you into the world as an ambassador of reconciliation, a testimony of God’s incomparable love. Jesus lives! Your life in him is resurrection witness.”

May the Lord bless you this Easter Day!

Amen

- Let Your Life Speak, Parker J. Palmer, Jossey-Bass Inc., San Francisco 2000; p. 85-91
- ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, Pastoral Easter Letter for 2009, April 2, 2009 from Montana Synod, ELCA email