

Easter in October

John 20:1-16

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Easter in October.

This is a strange experience, isn't it?

I'll be honest. I was sort of hoping you all wouldn't hold me to this promise — especially once the pandemic rolled into the fall... and we had our first snow... and *then* the leaves started changing colors.

But then again, I have no one to blame but myself. I was the one who, back in April, made the promise that on the first Sunday we were back in the sanctuary together we would celebrate Easter. Back then, I said, "Even if we have to celebrate Easter on Christmas Eve, we're going to do Easter when we get back together."

I was hoping you'd all forget. I should have known better.

A few weeks ago, when I first mentioned the plan to be back in-person for worship to some of our parents of youth and children, it was Alicia Mitchell who raised her hand and said, "Uh, Pastor, back when this all started, you said that when we came back together, we'd celebrate Easter. Is that still happening, because Aniya has been asking to wear her Easter dress every week since then?"

I mean, how do you say no to that?

Dawn Martinez said, "My girls, too." Jennifer Heath and Tammy Lichtenstein were shaking their heads in agreement.

So here we are, while everyone else is putting up giant spiders and cobwebs, propping mummies in their sarcophagi, setting jack-o-lanterns on their stoops, and teething inflatable Frankensteins to their front lawns, and while Wal-Mart is putting up Christmas decorations — First Baptist Church of Colorado Springs was busy ordering Easter lilies!

Can you imagine how that phone call to the florist went? "You want what? It's little early, isn't it? Ok... I'll see what I can do..."

But we have Easter lilies in October, and we have Emilia to thank for that!

Seriously though — as out of season and as strange as it feels to be celebrating Easter in October, the Easter story from the John's gospel is the most appropriate of the Easter stories any way. The other three gospels — Matthew, Mark, and Luke — all say that it was *at dawn* or *after the sun had risen* that Mary Magdalene and the other women came to the place where Jesus had been laid.

But not John. John's gospel is unique in that it tells us that it was "*while it was still dark*" that Mary Magdalene came to the tomb (John 20:1). *That* is easier to imagine in late October, when the days are growing shorter, and the sun is coming up later.

And, it seems appropriate, because this is so often how our discovery of the risen Christ begins — in darkness.

The Presbyterian pastor and President of Princeton Theological Seminary, Craig Barnes, says, "Earlier this week, an old couple received a phone call from their son who lives far away. The son said he was sorry but he wouldn't be able to come for a visit over the holidays after all. 'The grandkids say hello.' They assured him that they understood, but when they hung up the phone, they didn't dare look at each other.

Earlier this week, a woman was called into her supervisor's office to hear that times are hard for the company and they had to let her go. 'So sorry.' She cleaned out her desk, packed away her hopes for getting ahead, and wondered what she would tell her kids.

Earlier this week, someone received terrible news from a physician. Someone else heard the words, 'I have never loved you.' Earlier this week, someone's hope was crucified. And the darkness is overwhelming.

No one is every ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen" ("Savior at Large," *The Christian Century*, March 12, 2002).

Her hope having been crucified earlier that week, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb *while it was still dark*.

Fred Craddock used to tell a wonderful story about a church where he was member that had had a fifteen year tradition of having five-hundred Easter lilies on Easter Sunday morning. He said they were always beautifully arranged, sometimes a bank of lilies, sometimes in the shape of a cross, sometimes almost carelessly strewn like an artist across a canvas.

"They were memorial lilies," he said. "People gave five dollars each, and so the insert in the bulletin on Easter had five hundred names remembered by the giving of a lily. Five hundred lilies, five dollars each. They were beautiful.

In the sixteenth year of that tradition, it came apart. One of the elderly members of our church, a woman, came up to the altar after the service and said, 'I'm going to the hospital to visit a friend. Can I take one of the lilies to the room?' And without really getting an answer to her question, she went up to the cross of lilies — 500 lilies — to get one, and she turned to those who remained in the sanctuary, and in a shocked voice, said, 'They're plastic!'

Well, there was a lot of concern, not just over their being plastic. 'We gave five dollars for lilies. If they're plastic, they may be the same ones we used last year.' And they gave five dollars last year.

Committees met and huddles formed, official and unofficial, and the whole tradition collapsed. Someone came up with the figure. 'Over 15 years, that's \$37,500 *for the same lilies!*'

The minister gathered those concerned together... and tried to defend the practice of having plastic lilies that were stored in a cool place and covered in dark, and they had indeed lasted for years. And they were beautiful."

As Craddock recalls, the minister's defense was along two lines:

"The practical defense in response to what has happened to the money, the minister said, 'We have used it in a contingency fund. We have been able to help transients and to meet emergencies that have not been budgeted. And let me assure you, the money has gone to good uses.' And there were whispers of acceptance by some, rejection by others.

His other line of defense was theological. He said, 'After all' — and he said this enthusiastically — 'after all, the plastic lilies are more appropriate to Easter, because they always bloom, they never die'" (from a sermon entitled, "The Waste of Easter").

Is that true? Are plastic lilies more appropriate to Easter since they never die?

Or is that precisely how Easter loses its true meaning? Can Easter mean anything without Good Friday? Can resurrection matter without death? Does the stone matter at all if it's not been rolled away from *a tomb*?

Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb while it was still dark. What she found was a stone rolled away from the tomb. When she saw that, she reached the only logical conclusion available to her — they had taken the Lord away. Wound upon wound, grief upon grief, pain upon pain: first he is crucified, now he has been stolen; first his death, now no way to say goodbye.

In a scene that makes the story so human that it's hard not to imagine yourself in it, Peter and the beloved disciple set out in a dead sprint to see if what she said was true. When they got there, all they found were his grave clothes. What kind of odd grave robbery was this, that they'd undress the body, and even go so far as to neatly fold up the cloth that had been covering his face?

Having seen the same thing, having witnessed the exact same scene, the two reach completely different conclusions; one sees and believes, the other sees and leaves uncertain.

Mary lingers a bit longer, too distraught to just leave things as they are. Weeping, she stoops over and looks in the tomb. The grave clothes had been transformed into angels. They didn't faze her. She treats them like orderlies stripping the hospital bed where you were looking for someone you love. She turned and saw Jesus standing there, but assumed he was, of all things, the gardener.

You know, only the gospel of John locates the tomb in a garden. Was it a mistake to think he was the gardener? In chapter 12, Jesus had taught a gardening lesson: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). Now the gardener has come again.

She says to the gardener, "If you have taken him, tell me where he is, and I will come get him. I will take him away. I will do all the work! Just tell me where he is!"

"Mary." That's all he says. Just that. He calls her by name, and at the sound of hearing her name issue forth from his mouth, she *knows*.

What is it about the way that Jesus says her name that makes it unmistakably clear who he is? Was it the timbre of his voice? Was it his unique inflection? Did he say it in just the way that he always had, hundreds of times before?

In another time and another place, Jesus talked about the Good Shepherd who knows his own and calls them by name (John 10). Clearly, Mary was one of his, because the moment he called her by name, she *knew*.

Names matter. *Our* names matter. That others call us *by name* matters. Would you ever consider someone a "close friend" if they didn't know how to pronounce your name correctly?

Our names matter. It is said that the Egyptian goddess, Isis, gained complete power over the sun god, Ra, when she learned his true name.

In Jewish tradition, only the high priest in the Temple of Jerusalem was allowed to utter the four-letter name of God - and even then only once a year.

A couple of years ago, writer, Jonathan Savage and his partner were being assessed as prospective adopters. He said, "We'd been told about the importance of identity to a child who has suffered loss and trauma. We [were] told that changing a child's birth name, no matter how much you might dislike it, could be damaging. Imagine having nothing but your name, and having that taken away by the new parents you were told would love and protect you" ("Why do names matter so much?", *BBC World Service*, January 21, 2018).

Our names matter — and how others carry our names matter. Do they speak our names like they have poison in their mouth or like they savor its taste? Do they use our names like a weapon, or do they hold them gently in their care?

When Jesus spoke her name, that is when Easter happened for Mary; that is when her hope was resurrected.

Two weeks from today, we will gather in here and we will speak the names of those we have lost to death in the last year — names like Joe Wells and Marti Wells, names like Gene Hanson and Dorothy Hanson, names like Mitzi Pilloud and Bre Smith and Sam Frank and Sara Krouse, the names of those who have now experienced the very real sting of death.

What shall we say in the face of the grave? Shall we say “Plastic lilies always bloom?” Shall we say, “Plastic lilies never die?”

Or shall we say their names?

Bob Patterson has said, “Our names are written on God’s heart, and they are spelled correctly” (*Who is Jesus Christ?*, 7).

That’s what we will say. We will say their names and, the whole while, remember that their names — and ours — are not only written on God’s heart. They are spelled correctly.

What matters about Easter is not our knowing the ins-and-outs of resurrection. What matters most about Easter is our remembering that that Jesus knows us by name and he calls us — *even while it is yet dark*.

Amen.