

"By the Dawn's Early Light" John 20:1-18

April 4, 2010

Easter Sunday (Sunrise)

On September 3, 1814, Francis Scott Key was being held prisoner on the *HMS Minden* while the British navy attacked Baltimore. He watched the battle, not knowing who would prevail. During the dark and rainy night, Key witnessed the bombardment of Ft. McHenry and, by the light of the exploding shells, noticed that the fort's smaller "storm flag" was flying. But once the barrage of shells and rockets ceased, Key would not know how the battle turned out until the next morning. When the light of dawn came, Francis Scott Key could see that the storm flag had been lowered and the large flag had been raised, signaling victory for the American troops. This inspired Key write the poem which would become our national anthem and began, "Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light What so proudly we hailed at the twilight's last gleaming?" In other words, the flag, which had been there at the twilight's last gleaming, was still there at the dawn's early light. Because it hadn't changed, victory was assured.

I thought of this event in American history as I contemplated our Gospel reading for this early morning hour. Our Lord Jesus died on the cross during a time of deep darkness when the sun's light failed. While that unnatural darkness apparently ended at 3:00 PM, the natural darkness of night would soon come. The Jewish authorities wanted the bodies of Jesus and the two criminals down from the cross before sunset. So, after Jesus died, His body was hastily taken down from the cross and temporarily interred in a tomb "at the twilight's last gleaming." And so the body remained in darkness that night and the night after.

Our Gospel for today tells us that Mary Magdalene left the warmth of her bed and the safety of her home to go to the tomb "while it was still dark". This trip on the first Easter was not a joyous trip like ours is today. The darkness during her trip symbolized the mood for the day. Sadness and despair reigned. Her friend, her teacher, her Lord was dead. As if the loss of a loved one to death was not sad enough, all of this wonderful talk about the coming of the kingdom of heaven seemed to die with Him.

Even the sight of the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb, the scene of an empty tomb, the appearance of angels and the sound of the angels' words were not enough to change her.

While this might seem to be quite surprising to us, it is every easy to explain. Mary expected to see “by the dawn’s early light” the same thing she had seen “at the twilight’s last gleaming”: the dead body of Jesus of Nazareth which still needed a proper burial. Unlike the battle witnessed by Francis Scott Key where the lack of change from twilight to dawn ensured victory, a lack of change here would ensure defeat. There would be no coming kingdom. Everything would be lost.

Yet something changed that. Something happened which would not only impact the life of Mary, but would completely change the world. Jesus appeared alive and directly encountered Mary. Although Mary, at first, thought that Jesus was the gardener, when He spoke to her and called her by name, “Mary!”, everything changed.

Mary now knew that Jesus was alive! Through this personal contact with Him, joy and hope replaced sadness and despair. She was able to run back to the disciples in the bright light of dawn with the glorious news, “I have seen the Lord!” The difference in her demeanor, in fact, in her whole life was..well..the difference between night and day.

Your trip to this sunrise service today may be just like Mary’s. You left the warmth of your bed and the comfort of your home to travel in the dark to the church. But the skies may not be the only dark thing in your life these days. As you contemplate the evil that exists in the world today and how bad it is getting politically, economically, or morally, your mood may be pretty dark. As you contemplate the evil that exists within you - how sinful you are (despite your best attempts to hide it or deny it) in thought, word and deed, in what you have done and have left undone – your own mortality, your spirit may be pretty dark.

You may come here, acting exactly like Mary, only to perform a religious ritual but thinking nothing has changed. The story is told of a time when Dr. Martin Luther was in a very dark mood. His wife, Katie, came to him, dressed in black with a black veil over her face. When Luther asked her why she was dressed in the clothes of mourning, she responded, “I thought Christ must still be dead by the way you are acting. Often, we Christians live our every day lives as if Jesus is still dead.

If, by the dawn’s early light, we find what was left at the twilight’s last gleaming, namely, the corpse of Christ, then there is reason for sadness and guilt. There is cause for hopelessness and despair. St. Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith... More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead...And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still

in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Cor. 15: 14,17-19)

The good news is that Jesus' dead body is no longer in the tomb. He has risen from the dead and is alive! Like Mary, the proof of an empty tomb, a vision of angels, or the sight of Jesus standing before us today will not prove His resurrection to us. Like Mary, it is only when He calls us by name that we will know and believe that He is truly alive.

He has done that for each of us in our baptisms. In baptism, He calls us individually by name and confers His name upon us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit given by water and the Word, we not only have our sins washed away but faith is created in our heart. This faith believes, not only that Jesus died on the cross, but that, on this day, He bodily became alive again, left the tomb, and is alive forevermore.

Faith also believes and has confidence in what Jesus' resurrection means. The payment made by Jesus on the cross for our sin to appease the anger of a holy God is indeed accomplished and finished as Jesus' proclaimed before He died. As St. Paul writes, "there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Rom. 8:1) That is not a general designation. That is something that applies personally to you. There is now no condemnation FOR YOU who are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus' resurrection also ensures our resurrection. During His ministry, Jesus had said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die." That's a wonderful promise for Him to make, but a rather hollow and meaningless one if He remained in His own tomb. But, because Jesus became alive after death, we know for certain that we, too, will live after death and that, on the Last Day, our bodies will rise from their graves to live in the glory and peace of heaven.

Like Mary leaving the tomb, we leave this sanctuary, not only (hopefully) in the bright sunlight, but in the light of the Son, Jesus Christ, who promised, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12) Where there was guilt, there is now a peace "which transcends all understanding". Where there was (and continues to be) sadness, there is an inexpressible joy. Where there is desperation and despair, there is an unshakeable hope for our future here and for all eternity.

With apologies to Francis Scott Key, I would sum up the meaning of this festive day, "Oh, say can you see by the dawn's early light What so sadly we mourned at the twilight's last gleaming?" The

answer is a grand and glorious, "NO!" The body of Jesus left dead in the tomb on Good Friday evening is no longer there on Easter morning! Christ is risen! (He is risen, indeed). Alleluia! Amen