

“While It Was Still Dark”

John 20: 1-18

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I have an Easter confession to make to you all this morning. I've been saving this story until our final months together in case you lose respect for me, because this story is about the day I became a hardened criminal.

When I was eight years old, I concocted the perfect crime. It was Easter morning and as usual, I was the first person awake in my family. I ran out of my bedroom on the hunt for Easter baskets, hoping to get a sneak peak before anyone else. There on the kitchen table, were two gigantic baskets, one for me, and one for my older brother Brian. They were your standard Easter baskets: chocolate, candy, little toys. As I was looking them over, my joy quickly turned to disappointment as I realized that the more exciting of the two baskets – the one bursting with new packs of baseball cards – was the one destined for my brother. My basket had some books, and a troll doll, but nothing as wonderful as baseball cards.

I remember thinking that the Easter bunny must have gotten confused – not everyone knows that girls also like baseball cards – so it must have been an innocent mistake. I remember thinking that surely if the Easter bunny knew how much I also loved collecting baseball cards, he would have left some for me as well. After momentarily pouting, I turned into problem solving mode.

I was the only one awake. No one else in my family knew what was in the Easter baskets. It was a secret between me and the Easter bunny, and he wouldn't show his face for another year. Since it was obviously a mix-up that needed to be righted, I stole half of the baseball card packs from my brother's basket, and tucked them inside of mine. Then, to make sure no one would suspect anything, I ran back to bed and pretended to sleep until everyone else was up and waiting for me at the kitchen table. It was 24 years ago, but I still remember how I pretended to be

surprised and delighted – as if seeing my basket for the first time.

My mom didn't seem as delighted as I was about my baseball cards, but she didn't say anything. The whole day went by and I kept my head down, focused on egg hunts and visiting family, and no one said a word. When my mom came in to tuck me in at bedtime, she finally said this, “You know, Liz. I got a call from the Easter bunny this evening. He wanted to know how you and your brother liked your baskets, and he was surprised that there were baseball cards in your basket, because he left those especially for Brian. Do you know how they got into your basket?”

In the midst of wet, sloppy tears, I confessed everything. My mom didn't shout or punish me. She listened, and when I was done, she asked me to tell my brother the truth. Brian received an even tear-ier confession; one that I think embarrassed him more than anything. He always responded with a surprising amount of grace, especially for a big brother. Because of their reaction and their love it may have been my first day as a criminal, but it was also my last.

That is my Easter confession to all of you. I am not only a thief, but a failed thief. I am reminded of this story every Easter and it still embarrasses me a little. To me, it feels like everyone else is focused on joy and celebration today and I carry this memory with me – a memory where I learned a huge lesson not only in what not to do, but also one in the gentle forgiveness and compassion that my family offered. Trust me when I say I committed plenty of other offenses in my childhood that were not met with such understanding and sweetness. The Easter bunny was definitely not the only person I tried to pull one over on. My mom and brother had plenty of reasons to shout at or punish me. But on Easter, they didn't. For whatever reason, on that Easter Sunday, this one was handled differently. In many ways it is a silly story, born of the innocence and impishness of a child, but nevertheless, it has become woven into my understanding of what Easter is. It has created an understanding in me that though Easter is about joy, there is a wave of other emotions that also run through it.

On that first Easter, the women and the disciples who arrived at the tomb were full of their own conflicting thoughts and emotions. Mary discovers the tomb is empty and I imagine her tears are out of the fear of thinking someone stole Jesus' body, tears mixed in with the guilt of having left that body unguarded for even an hour, tears over the guilt of not being able to prevent his death in the first place. Along with Mary, Peter came to see the empty tomb. Peter who came carrying the shame of his denial and betrayal with him – looking and feeling anything but happy.

On that first Easter morning, the emotion was raw – the disciples who were present were more ready for a place to confess their deeds and misdeeds over the past few days rather than prepare themselves for a resurrection celebration. They were full of doubt, sorrow, pain, and shame. The joy of Easter day has been built up over the centuries, because we all know how this particular story ends, but initially there was no joy, only grief.

That makes the Easter resurrection story a lot more complex, and a lot more relatable. I am sure this morning there are those of us who came to this sanctuary with emotions tucked inside of us that we would rather cast aside in the name of a holiday celebration. Some of us carry grief of missing loved ones who are not here today; some carry the impending stress of gathering at crowded dinner tables with friends and family while others know the loneliness of a quiet meal planned. Many of us carry the guilt of feeling like in the midst of those emotions we aren't more focused on being grateful for what we have. For some of us, this morning we carry the doubts and disbelief that keep us away from church on most Sundays. For others of us, we hold onto the doubts and disbelief that keep us coming here as many Sundays as possible.

There is joy here – there is always joy – but there is so much more that we have to wade through, to feel and sort out and acknowledge, before we can fully embrace the joy. Like the disciples, we are bringing the weight of our yesterdays and last weeks and all that we have experienced before we can fully understand what happens on Easter, what happened on the day

they found out that Jesus' tomb was empty.

The Good News of Easter is twofold: the Good News is of course, that Christ is resurrected and that nothing can overcome God's light in the world, not even death. The *other* Good News is that this was, is, and remains true no matter what we are feeling or carrying with us this morning. No matter what we have done in the past, or what burdens we carry, it does not change the fact that Christ is resurrected! There is nothing that could keep Christ from being resurrected on that first Easter morning, just as there is nothing that can keep the resurrected Christ from us today.

We like to say that no matter who you are or where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. Well this morning I would like to rephrase that and say: No matter who you are, or what you have done, or what you are feeling, or what you need to confess: Christ is resurrected! Christ is resurrected for you, for me, for every single one of us! Nothing can change that! Nothing can stop God's love from coming into the world. Nothing can prevent the story from being told or from being true – not that first Easter morning or any morning after. Christ is resurrected. Mary was sad, she was confused, she was worried, but Christ still spoke to her. Christ helped her see him – really recognize him in the midst of her despair – and helped her understand that nothing could keep God from coming back into the world, from bringing forth life and love, even in places that only knew emptiness and grief.

What Mary and the disciples learned on that first Easter is that the Good News is that the resurrection of life does not depend on us being perfect or endlessly joyful – resurrection of life and love does not depend on us having the answers, or depend on us feeling or saying the right thing at all the right times. It doesn't depend on us at all. We are beside the point. The point of Easter, the Good News of Easter, is all about God. No matter what we are thinking or feeling, God is still here. Christ has returned! Nothing can keep him away! We carry our burdens and our pain, and still he returns. The promise of Easter morning is that nothing can keep us from Jesus – nothing can keep

us from God – nothing can keep us from God's love. Not even death can separate us from love. No matter what has happened or what will happen, life and love still triumph. Amen!