

Easter, 2008: The Rev. Dr. Tom Blair, “Waiting by the Tomb,” John 20:1-18

I have been waiting by the tomb nearly all my life, and today I am so relieved. Christ is risen, and I am relieved.

My dad died before I was two years old, so for as long as I can remember I have had thoughts and questions about death and the eternal. I am so glad for Easter.

Some of you have been waiting by the tomb for a long, long time. Some of you haven't been waiting all that long. But time makes no difference whatsoever. Some of you have a parent you're waiting to see. Some of you have children whom you long, desperately, to see again. Some of you have brothers, or sisters, Aunts, Uncles, or cousins to see again. They are gone because of tragedy, war, disease, old age, and are no longer with us, and now we wait. Waiting means life in the shadows, sometimes gray, sometimes dark- sometimes with just a beam of light breaking in...

So this is a day of incredible meaning for me, and I hope for you- too, as we together embrace the ancient and brand-new report of Jesus' resurrection.

In some ways, our wait is over. Let this be news enough for today. Christ is risen! This is more than enough for me to handle—any more would, honestly, knock me flat.

Easter begins with a wait, and in darkness, when we're quite unsure what will happen next. Light comes after darkness- we know that much, but when?

Easter is ultimately about things that are high, bright, light and clear, but Easter begins with things that are low, dim, dark and murky. Waiting in the dark is hard- but we don't wait alone.

Waiting by the tomb is something every one of us will do, one way or another. Mary's Easter story helps us, as we wait on what has happened with our loved ones and what will happen to us, too.

We're told up front that for Mary, the day eventually known as Easter began in the dark.

She awoke before dawn and walked through the darkened streets of Jerusalem before it was light. It was a dangerous thing for a woman to do alone in those chaotic days. But after spending a sleepless night in grief, (the nights are always hardest), she decided to risk it.

She walked a good distance to mourn, to grieve by herself in the cemetery. You need to be in the right place to have it all come back to you—the loss, the hurt, the reality of it all. She was prepared to sit, and wait- and cry her heart out.

But when Mary arrived at the tomb of Jesus, stunningly, she had no need to wait. What she found was an empty tomb. He was missing. He had been wrapped in linen cloths, soaked with pounds and pounds of spices- according to Jewish custom, as the gospel reports. He should have been there! She saw him placed there. But his body was no longer there.

Now, not only was Jesus dead- he was gone as well. “Grave robbers!” Mary’s first reaction was surely not joy- but fear and confusion! Sprinting back to find the disciples- she shares the first news of Easter: “They’ve taken him and we don’t know where they’ve put him.”

Confusion then shifts to Peter and the other disciple, who sprint back where she had just come from. By the time she arrives, gasping for breath, the disciples are just emerging from the tomb- Peter with a look of puzzlement of his face, the other with an enigmatic smile.

Then, rather than both of them starting to search around the garden for clues, they just walked back home- saying nothing. It figured.

They had abandoned Jesus when he was arrested, why should Mary expect them to stick their necks out to track down his corpse now- especially if the authorities were somehow behind this theft? So now what?

At least she’s left alone now. It didn’t dawn on her to leave. But now, left waiting and weeping by the tomb, the last thing she ever expected to happen happened. Suddenly sensing something behind her, quickly turning around in the changing light, she sees a figure. It’s the gardener. He asks why she’s crying, what she’s looking for. All she wants now is the dead body of Jesus.

In waiting by the tomb, the first real light of Easter began to break through. In the depths of her grief, with Jesus dead and her friends just having left her, when all is lost- - totally; something else happens.

This gardener calls her by name, "Mary." It is Jesus, risen. Stunned, she can only say, "*Rabbouni!*" It was probably Mary’s favorite name for her teacher. Out of indescribable joy she lunges to embrace him.

What happens next and how we understand this next scene makes all the difference in the world for us. The brilliance and wonder of Jesus' appearance takes on even more meaning. To our dismay, and certainly Mary's, the risen Christ says, "Do not hold onto me."

Tertullian, a second century Christian historian, wrote that some early despisers of Christianity finished the story by claiming that this man who appeared really was the gardener after all, that he had stolen the body because he didn't want crowds of tourists visiting the tomb and trampling on his cabbages.

A Hollywood director, on the other hand, would finish the scene with lush strings, maybe Cat Stevens on the vocal track, glints of light from the rising sun on the morning dew, slow-motion shots as Mary runs to embrace him. Jesus is back. They embrace and live happily ever after.

Yet the Gospel writer John reports to us that even Mary, the first witness of the Risen Lord, is denied the satisfaction of holding him. Jesus is there, not just to pick up life where they left it, to forget all about the tragedy of the loss and the cross, to magically turn the clock backward to erase what had happened, but to help her move forward and to direct her onward.

Jesus' apparent snub of Mary means that there is no going back. Everything will be changed. There is to be one who abides with us, but only after Jesus departs. And that One is the Holy Spirit.

Mary doesn't get a big hug from Jesus, what she gets is authority to share his news. "Go and tell my brothers," he says to her- "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." His words echo Ruth's from so long before—"Your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Christ's resurrected presence signals God's design to subdue the power of death and to gather up all humanity in his rising.

Mary waited by the tomb. And so do we. We wait, and Easter creeps up on us while we yet sit before the dawn. Easter comes for those who, like Mary, still find themselves living in the shadows.

The good news of the gospel emerges from the shadows of the world in which we live. Darkness, sadness and death are the setting of Easter.

And death is Easter's forerunner in the broad sense that Easter's light shines all the brighter precisely because it finds us in the shadowlands of our lives.

So, in less time than it takes for the sun to rise from the dark earth, to balance for an instant as a glowing ball on the rim of our horizon, and to ascend, beaming light all over the world, Mary went from mourning her lost teacher, through a fleeting encounter with the Risen one who called her by name, to losing him again as he eluded her grasp and ascended.

But in those very moments she was changed. She began with tears: "They have taken away my Lord, and we don't know where they've put him."

She ends, sharing the news "I have seen the Lord!"

Mary was never the same after Easter. Easter comes for those, who like Mary, still find themselves living in the shadows.

After the resurrection, things do not return to normal. That's the good news. Now we can't even count on the darkness, for at some point it will break. In the meantime, we can choose to sit by the tomb and wait, or we can live with the gifts given us, with generosity, love, compassion and humility, for Jesus' sake, for those we love and those we miss.

We now know for sure that a risen Savior is on the loose. And without even an embrace from him, we can be given the spirit of the resurrection; given more courage, hope and love to share than we could ever hope to muster on our own.

It all begins in waiting, and God only knows when that stranger will appear behind us, but Christ will arrive. For in Christ, God has faced the grave and now even death is given over to life.

God has turned the darkness of the night into the dawning of a new day. The worst that can ever happen has been trumped by the best that God can do. Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, not even death itself.

So here is the news you have been waiting to hear, waiting by the tomb, a secret that Gardeners and angels share, "The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah. Amen!"