

This story begins in the dark. Death is all around. Mary Magdalene wandering among the tombs and gravestones in the garden, making her way past the place where Jesus died, toward the place his body was laid. Jesus is dead, she thinks as she wanders. It may not be clear to her in the fog of grief, in the persistent dark, but she is in a time and a place where death holds sway.

Are we not also wandering in such a time, such a place? Does not death hold sway for us too? Last night, gathered around the cross, we lit candles to break the dark, to defy death's grip, but the dark hung on. Maybe because the pandemic has now begun its third year, and many continue in anxiety and fear, unknowing, exhausted vigilance, perhaps even sick ourselves. Or maybe it's the unprovoked invasion and war plaguing the news, while the accompanying atrocities beat down the doors we use to shut the death out. For whatever reason, the murder and death of Jesus seems nearer at hand here in the dark, and now especially with the stone rolled back from the tomb.

Seeing it rolled away, the sway of death puts its powers to work on Mary: The narrative of what must have happened takes hold. Death, unquestioned, immovably true, makes the only possible explanation one in which "They" have taken the Lord's body. In the dark, no other possibility remains.

Mary repeats her story three times, believing it more in its retelling. First to Peter and the disciple “whom Jesus Loved.” Then to the angels seated inside the tomb after the other disciples have left. And finally, to this one whom she supposes must be the gardener. He seems to speak from outside the sway in which Mary is swirling, but so blinded by death is she that such questions make him party to the crime. “Sir” she tells him, securely in the sway of death, “if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

“Mary” he says. With gentleness and familiarity he breaks the chains that have held her from hoping. But at the sound of her name the story woven by death crumbles, evaporating in the clear sight of her living, breathing teacher.

It is with a name, a clear and intimate address, that God in Christ speaks God’s quiet defiance to death. With that defiant address that shatters the grip of death on Mary, Jesus addresses you too, calling you by name. From the dark (in the untruth we believe about the power of death, the narrative that it must be in control) is impenetrable. But with your name, Jesus calls you out of its sway and meets you with the warm eyes and living flesh of him who has died - and over whom death has no power at all.

The Easter Vigil helps us to greet the living Christ, raised from the dead. But it also seeks to remind us what it is, in the end, that now holds sway for us. If Christ has shattered the bonds of death, the bonds that shape the stories we tell, what story now takes shape at the sound of our name?

This story is told in the water and words spoken over us in baptism. By water and word we are made one with Jesus, who once was dead but now lives. At the sound of our names, we too are raised with Christ out of the sway of death and brought to life. Paul speaks it plain: "We are buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead... so we too might walk in newness of life."

This is the story we must tell - God's victory over death that we now know and are brought into by the beckoning call of Jesus. He calls your name - the most intimate invitation to turn and see and know that death has been swallowed up forever. Hearing her name, Mary tells this story. Hearing your name from the lips of the one who once was dead but lives again, what story will you tell? May it echo Mary who, having run to tell the others disciples announces - "I have seen the Lord."

AMEN