

Savior at large: John 20:1-18

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [March 13, 2002](#) issue

John begins the Easter story with the words, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” This is always how our discovery of the risen Christ begins—in darkness. While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to a tomb because earlier in the week Jesus had been killed. With him, her hope died.

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 ever ready to encounter Easter until he or she has spent time in the dark place where hope cannot be seen. Easter is the last thing we are expecting. And that is why it terrifies us. This day is not about bunnies, springtime and girls in cute new dresses. It’s about more hope than we can handle.

As Mary made her way down the dark road to the tomb, memories of better days in Galilee tried to pierce through the darkness. Ah, Galilee. How far away that must have seemed from this wretched place. Jesus was popular then. Hope had taken root in her heart. No one ever knew exactly what to expect of Jesus, but clearly they all had higher hopes for him than that he would be crucified as a traitor to Rome and a blasphemer to the Jews.

When Mary arrived at the tomb, she was startled to discover that it was empty. At first she was horrified. As she told Peter and another disciple, “They have taken the

Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Then John tells us that for a while there was a lot of running back and forth to the tomb. This is still what we disciples of Jesus do when he is missing. We run around a lot.

Eventually it all gets to be too much for Mary and she breaks down in tears by the door of the empty tomb. When she sees a couple of angels sitting in the place where Jesus was supposed to be, she is not at all impressed, but tells them, “They have taken the Lord.” Then a man she assumed to be the gardener asks her why she is weeping. All that Mary wants is for him to give her back the dead body of Jesus.

Finally, the gardener, who is the risen Savior, calls her by name. “Mary.” Stunned, she can only say, “*Rabbouni!*” It was probably Mary’s favorite name for her old teacher. Out of indescribable joy she lunges to embrace him. But to our dismay, and certainly Mary’s, the risen Christ says, “Do not hold onto me.”

This is not my favorite part of the Easter story. If I were writing this drama, I would have included a long tearful hug, followed by Jesus saying, “Find the others and tell them I’m back. We’re getting out of here and going home.” But Jesus doesn’t say that. He says, “Don’t cling to me.”

Following Jesus is a never-ending process of losing him the moment we have him captured, only to discover him anew in an even more unmanageable form. Every expectation of Jesus is only another futile effort to get him back in the tomb. But Jesus just won’t stay there.

What we long for, what we miss and beg God to give back, is dead. Easter doesn’t change that. So we cannot cling to the hope that Jesus will take us back to the way it was. The way out of the darkness is only by moving ahead. And the only person who can lead the way is the Savior. But not the old *Rabbouni* we once knew, which is only one more thing that has to be left behind. Until we discover a new vision of the Savior, a savior who has risen out of our disappointments, we’ll never understand Easter.

The question that Easter asks of us is not “Do we believe in the doctrine of the resurrection?” Frankly, that’s not particularly hard. Our doctrines bend easily to conform to the darkness, and before long our beliefs are reduced to sentimental claims about the spirit of Easter or “new beginnings.” Or we make the opposite mistake of insisting only on belief in the historicity of this event. It’s all just a way of begging the question. What the Gospels ask is not “Do you believe?” but “Have you

encountered a risen Christ?”

We get the feeling that Mary was never the same after Easter. Neither is anyone who has learned that what matters is not that we be confident in our hold of Jesus, but confident in his hold of us. Seeing that, we are ready for anything.

After the resurrection, things do not return to normal. That's the good news. It is basic to everything else the New Testament proclaims. After seeing a risen Jesus, we see that there is no normal. Now we can't even count on the darkness. All we know for sure is that a risen Savior is on the loose. And he knows our names.