

Easter Sunrise - 2013 **Names of Wondrous Love - THE LIGHT**

If only AZ were on Daylight Saving Time! If AZ had adopted Daylight Saving Time our Easter Sunrise Service would be more accurate, more authentic. If AZ had adopted Daylight Saving Time our Easter Sunrise Service would occur, this year, at sunrise. And if our Sunrise Service really began at sunrise, most of us would be waking up and getting up and getting ready while it was still dark. That's what the women experienced when they went to Jesus' tomb on that first Easter morning. Their trip began in the darkness of night. It moved into the gray dawn as they approached the tomb. It peaked in the glorious light of the day.

Our Lenten Season experience has been somewhat similar. For the past six weeks we've been moving through the Season of Lent. The hours we've spent traveling with Jesus have been rather somber, solemn, serious ones. Even as those hours focused our attention on our Savior's Names of Wondrous Love, they also drew our attention to our sins. They reminded us forcefully of God's anger at those sins and God's death for those sins. Those dark hours sent us home deeply aware of what we had deserved from a holy God and what Christ had to suffer in our place.

But today it's all different. Today we come out of the Lenten Season into the glorious light of another Easter. And today we look at one last Name of Wondrous Love for our Savior - The Light.

I. Dark Night

We begin in Dark Night. We know from the other Gospels that Mary Magdalene was not alone when she set out for the tomb of Jesus. But John's Gospel chooses to focus on Mary alone. That first Easter Mary Magdalene went early, "*while it was still dark.*" Those words not only set the stage in terms of the time of day, but they probably also describe her mood. If you've ever lost a loved one, you know something about how she must have felt. Loss, despair, and grief flood the heart, with a loved one gone never to return again. But Mary's darkness went much deeper than that. Remember her past months. Mary Magdalene had followed Jesus, serving him with full devotion and a heart full of faith in him as the promised Savior.

But then had come the dark hours of the past week. Not only was the sky over Calvary covered with thick darkness as she stood beneath the cross, so was her heart. Not only was the tomb into which they had hurriedly placed his lifeless body devoid of light, so was her spirit. How can we even imagine the hopelessness, the despair that settled over her soul when they had buried Jesus and with him all her hopes in him as the promised Savior. How can we imagine the darkness as she sobbed later to Peter and John, "*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!*"?

Mary was in despair. That's why the tears came as she stood by his opened tomb. She thought that not only was her Savior dead but now even his body had been stolen. How happy she would have been if she had found his lifeless form still in that grave so that she could embalm it! But now she was denied even that last labor of love. Yes, she came "*while it was still dark,*" not only in the sky but in her soul also.

I know there are many here today who know that feeling. Anyone who's wept at the grave of a loved one, anyone who's struggling with life, getting tired of its burdens and weary of its weight, anyone who's worried about health, about loved ones, about jobs, the economy, the future, anyone who never seems to get control of sin, whose temptations always seem to win, anyone who feels trapped in complete darkness without a glimmer of light. Listen and learn as we follow Mary Magdalene from **dark night** into **gray dawn**.

II. Gray Dawn

Early morning darkness just has to yield. The dawn comes. It happens every day. So also on that first Easter. Let's look a little more closely into our text. You can see the dawn coming, just a little gray light at first, but light nonetheless. In the first glimmer of light that day, Mary could see the stone rolled away from the tomb of her Lord. So she ran to tell the disciples. Mary should've known that the disciples wouldn't have broken open Jesus' tomb and stolen his body. She knew that those disciples were too frightened to even consider such an act.

A little more thought and Mary would've known that Jesus' enemies had nothing to do with the rolled away stone either. In fact, that was the very thing they were trying so hard to prevent. They had posted an around-the-clock guard and sealed the tomb securely to keep the stone in place. They wanted Jesus to remain dead in his tomb so that people would start forgetting about him and his claims. They wanted things to settle back to normal again.

Prompted by Mary's breathless report, Peter and John ran to the tomb with Mary Magdalene following. John got there first. Beginning at verse 5,

⁵He (John) bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, ⁷as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. ⁸Finally the other disciple, (John) who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

The dawn was starting. Easter light was beginning to shine into darkened souls. But was this good news or a mistaken conclusion? The news was so wonderful that at first it was unbelievable. Still, Easter light was starting to shine through the gray dawn.

Have you ever had your hopes raised only to have them dashed to pieces? Ever walked away from Sunday worship edified and uplifted only to have the reality of your life come crashing down and diminish your joy? Ever listen to Jesus' words, ". . . *whoever lives and believes in me will never die*" only to begin to wonder, to begin to doubt, when it's your loved one who's being buried or your grave that's sneaking closer?

Sometimes the dawning Easter with its promise of joy is dimmed by pain and problem, loss and doubt. Listen and learn as we follow Mary Magdalene from **gray dawn** into morning's **glorious light**.

III. Glorious Light

Dawn doesn't last long. It's only that short period between night and light. That's how it was on that first Easter. Soon the glorious SON appeared. Not only the sun in the heavens, but The SON from heaven, and with him all his glorious light. In the dawn Mary had seen the stone rolled away. In the full light of day, she had returned to the tomb to weep and mourn the disappearance of Jesus. Then it

happened! As she wept, she turned and noticed a man standing behind her. Through tear-dimmed eyes she didn't recognize him. But when he said, "Mary," her heart leapt for joy. "Teacher," she said in amazement.

This was her Lord. She wasn't mistaken. She had seen them lay his body in the grave, and she recognized him now. With amazing suddenness her tears stopped flowing and the weight was lifted from her heart. All her sorrow turned to joy. Darkness had vanished. Now it was "My Savior lives." No more darkness, just the bright light of Easter victory for her.¹⁸ *Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!"*

What a day that was for Mary and the others! What wondrous truths his resurrection brought them. No more could sin's guilt hammer them. Christ had been delivered for their offenses and raised again for their justification. Their guilt (and ours) had been laid on him. Their guilt (and ours) crucified him. But his resurrection was proof positive that he had paid for all those sins. By raising his beloved Son, the Father had plainly shown Christ's payment was complete.

Satan couldn't bully them any more, because on Calvary Christ had crushed his head. The Savior even descended into hell on that glorious Easter morning to lay the old, evil foe flat in the dust of defeat. No more could death hold them. Christ had entered his grave and exited his grave to show that because he lives, they also would live. These wondrous truths, sealed by their Savior's resurrection, filled their days with glorious life, and filled their deaths with victory.

A day that began in darkness ended in light for Mary Magdalene and the disciples. You and I have made a journey from darkness to light. When God brought you to faith he took you from darkness to light. 1 Peter 2:9-10 (NIV) *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness (the darkness of unbelief) into his wonderful light.* The Apostle Paul reminds us, *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.* Ephesians 5:8 (NIV).

I hope and pray that everyone here not only sees the glorious light of Easter, but that you live in it daily. The glorious light of Easter can lift you above your daily battles. Easter's glorious light can brighten your darkest day and keep the smile of faith on your lips. Easter's glorious light shines down on your deathbed and puts a light that cannot be extinguished into your grave. Long after the lettering on your gravestone has worn away, this Easter light will still be shining. As long as the world stands, people of God like us will find our greatest joy in the risen Savior, who said, "*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 (NIV).

We pray:

O Precious Savior, the Light of the World,

Your glorious resurrection destroyed death and brought us life and immortality. We praise and honor you, O Light of the World for your victory over sin and death.

Help us now to live as Children of Light, reflecting the saving truth of your Gospel to those who are still in the darkness of unbelief.

We pray in your name our Risen Savior. Amen.