

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I know we don't really have these up here in Alaska, but if you've gone outside, have you ever traveled through a long, dark tunnel? If you've journeyed the mountain roads of Colorado, you have run into a tunnel or two. What a feeling! It's almost scary and confining, as you leave the bright sun behind and enter that dimly lit tunnel. How glad you are when you see the exit with its brighter light beckoning in the distance! And even better, when you drive out again into the warm sunshine!

The Lenten season is something like that tunnel experience. For some weeks now, we've been in the tunnel of Lent. The hours we've spent traveling with our Jesus have been rather somber, solemn, serious ones. Even as those hours focused our attention on our Savior's wondrous names of love, they also drew our attention to our sins. They reminded us forcefully of God's anger over 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 drive out of the Lenten tunnel into the full sunshine, the glorious light of another Easter. For our joy, our comfort, our praise, today we look at one more name of wondrous love for our Savior, the Light.

That first Easter morning Mary Magdalene came early, "while it was still dark," our text says. Those words just about described the condition of her heart too. Any of you who have lost a loved one 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.

Do you know about Mary Magdalene's past? Just months earlier, Jesus had cured her when he had cast seven demons out of her. From then on she had followed him, serving him with full devotion and dedication 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 pitch black as she stood beneath his 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 deep abyss her spirit sank into as she approached the tomb, only to find it open, empty, her Lord's body gone, surely some ruse created by the chief priests and teacher of the law so they could hunt down his followers as well. How can we imagine the blackness 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 a tunnel without light, without an exit. That's why she could do nothing but stand idly by the empty tomb as Peter and John left to go back to Jerusalem. That's why the tears flowed freely as she stood by his opened tomb, lamenting her loss with no hope of a return. 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.

Is there anyone here today who knows that feeling? Any of you who feel like you're stuck in the dark? Any of you who've wept at a freshly filled grave or who've returned to weep again and again? Any of you who've struggled with life, getting tired of its burdens and weary of its weight? Any of you who've worried about health, loved ones, jobs, the economy, the future? Any of you whose sins just never seem to go away and whose temptations always seem to win?

Like where you wake up in the morning, refreshed by the Spirit, all ready to tackle the day's challenges, convinced you can take it to the devil and come out on top. But it's not long before you find yourself failing and flailing underneath his weight and under the hold of temptation, and finally, just giving up and giving in. "I can't help but overindulge in that sin, whether it's eating too much, drinking too much, lusty too much, swearing too much, lying too much, gossiping too much."

"Satan's hold on me is too strong; I have to give in to his temptations to get angry and yell at my loved ones. I have to let other objects or events take away from worshipping God or serving God so that I'm making myself number one."

"I just can't live up to God's standard. I can't win this fight, especially when I don't see anyone else really fighting, either, but just giving in to their sinful wants and desires. It's easier to join the crowd and let the darkness win."

Are there any of you who feel that he/she has been shoved into some tunnel without any exit with daylight in sight? Where there's no hope of getting out but instead feeling the tug of Satan, pulling you deeper toward the abyss of hell? Then stick around. Listen and learn as we follow Mary Magdalene from dark night into gray dawn.

Dawn doesn't last long. It's only that short period between night and light. So also that first Easter day. Soon the glorious SON appeared and with him all his glorious light. In the dawn Mary had seen the stone rolled away and had run back to report her fears. Later, in the daylight, she had returned to the tomb to weep and tell the angels the same story.

How blinded she was by her grief! These messengers from God, I'm sure their faces gleaming with joy, them doing all they could to keep from exploding with the glorious news of the resurrection, and she couldn't see it.

And then, there he was! As she wept, she turned and noticed a man standing behind her. The risen Lord! And still, nothing. Through tear-dimmed eyes she didn't recognize him. For all she knew, this was just the gardener, coming to water the flowers, but maybe he knew something about the body freshly laid there just a couple of days ago, but now no longer there. And she cried out to him, looking for one final straw of hope to grasp onto, her light still flickering, but dying by the minute.

He spoke but one word, "Mary," and her heart turned over. "Master," she said in amazement. This was her Lord. She was not in error. She had seen them lay his body in the grave, and she recognized him now. With amazing suddenness her tears were dried for her and the weight was lifted from her heart.

All past sorrows were gone. Darkness had vanished. Now it was “My Savior lives.” No more tunnel, just the bright light of Easter victory for her.

And friends, there’s the bright light of Easter victory for you and me as well! For Mary, it all came from one word of comfort. How about for us? What’s the Easter word of comfort today for you?

How about “risen”? Death is defeated. The tomb cannot hold our Savior. He is alive, and because he lives, we also will live.”

Is the word “saved”? As the Bible says, “He was delivered for our sins, and he was raised for our justification.” Sin’s guilt can no longer hammer us. Jesus lived the perfect life in our place, he died to save us from our sins, and he’s risen so he can declare us not guilty. In God’s eyes, our sin no longer exists.

Or, maybe the word is “forgiven”? The apostle Paul writes, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.” Our sins are no longer there. They are gone. We are forgiven! Any of those words, all of those words, point to the Light at the end of the tunnel, Jesus, our Savior, crucified, killed, but now risen!

Because of the Light, we are saved. Obviously, Jesus, the Light, we treasure him dearly. Like Mary Magdalene, we want nothing more than to grab hold of him, to be in his light forever.

But you notice what he told Mary? Not yet. The risen Jesus was not the same Jesus she had seen go into the tomb. As the victorious Light of the World, with the darkness of sin crushed beneath his feet, Jesus’ rightful place was in heaven, ruling on his eternal throne.

She would be with him again, but now was not the time. Jesus would leave her, but he didn’t just want her to sit around and wait expectantly for him again. She had some wonderful news (that’s an understatement), and Jesus wanted her to share it with the rest of the disciples, to let them know Jesus indeed is risen.

I bet you can see the comparisons to our lives. I’m sure you would want nothing more than to stand in the radiance of our victorious Savior and King day and night. And we will get there, soon enough. But we’re not there yet. Jesus know it’s not our time to reach the end of this tunnel of light, where we will bask in the light of the Son, or SONshine, for all of eternity.

But while we wait, what an awesome job our risen Lord bestows on us. You and I are messengers of the Easter joy. Oh, I know we sing about it with our jubilant songs and praises today. But these walls should not contain our joy. We are lights for the Light of the World, and what we say, what we do in our lives that will radiate the love of him who lived, died, and rose for us! We get to show those who are still in the dark tunnel there’s a light at the end, a Savior who lived, who died, and now who is risen indeed, all for them! As long as the world stands, people of God like us will find their 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.”

Today we leave the dark tunnel of Lent for the glorious light of Easter. Someday each of us will enter another tunnel, the dark tunnel of death. What comfort to know that at the end of that dark tunnel stands the risen Jesus, the One who truly is the Light of the world. What a day that will be when we can join with Mary and the others in singing the praises of his wondrous love, of his radiant grace, of our glorious Light. Amen.