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A great classical piece of music is Anton Dvorak's Symphony #9, the New World Symphony. Let me begin by reflecting on the epoch that Dvorak was depicting in this symphony. First of all, Anton Dvorak was born in Bohemia, now part of the Czech Republic. in 1841. He became popular in Germany and then in England in the 1880's. In 1892 he became the Director of the New York National Conservatory. During this time he wrote his 9th Symphony which he entitled, *From the New World*. He wrote from America at a time when thousands and thousands of people from Ireland, Italy, Germany, and Poland were migrating from the homes their ancestors lived in for centuries to find a new life and a new world.

My grandparents from Italy and Ireland were part of this immigration. Perhaps your grandparents or great grandparents were also on those long lines on Ellis Island, still sick from the sea voyage, frightened by the sights around them, wondering what was going to become of them in this strange new land.

It is hard to imagine the sacrifices they had to endure. There was the sea, the language, the search for a place to live, a job in a hostile job market. My grandmother's kitchen had a sign that she tore off a factory fence – No Irish need apply. They were accustomed to receiving respect in their home towns and villages. They were belittled and insulted by many in America. Still, they endured all. Why? They wanted a better life for their children and grandchildren. It was more than that they did not want their children to go hungry. They wanted their children to be able to break out of the silent caste system of Europe. They wanted their children to become professionals if they could. They wanted their children to have the best of lives without any external limitations. So they sacrificed their own positions of respect in their community, their own homes, their own countries, their futures, all for the sake of a new world for their children.

Jesus the Christ longed for a New World for God's children. He longed for a world where they would no longer be confined in a mortal prison by hatred, by paganism, by materialism. He grieved over people who were like sheep without a shepherd. Their lives were pointless. They wanted meaning but could not find meaning. In this way their lives were not that much different from the lives of many people of our time. Modern people spend millions of dollars on self-help books. They go to gurus. They give themselves over to modern forms of Buddhism, thinking that they can find happiness and peace within themselves. But they end up with nothing. They work much harder than they need to in order to make enough money to own everything this old world can produce. And they end with nothing of lasting value.

Jesus wants to lead all of God's children to a New World, a world which would give meaning and happiness to their lives. But the journey to this New World would take sacrifice. A Tremendous Sacrifice from a Tremendous Lover. And so Jesus allowed the world to do its worse to Him. The terrible sacrifice took place on the cross on Good Friday. The New World was proclaimed on Easter Sunday. Those who accept Jesus would be given a new life, a spiritual life, an eternal life. The prophecy of *Hosea 6:2* is fulfilled. It is a prophecy that we seldom hear quoted but it means everything to us: "*On the third day he will raise us up that we might live before Him.*"

Jesus invites us to join Him on the journey to the New World. This journey demands that we also sacrifice. It demands that we reject the old, dead way of life. The journey demands that we accept being alone in a world full of mockers. They tell us that we are wasting our time, our money and our energy on religion. They say that fewer and fewer people are believing. We tell them that we would rather be in a minority with Jesus than in a majority that rejects Him. We have no problem

(with thanks to the Marines) THE FEW, THE PROUD, THE CATHOLICS. We suffer from others. We also suffer from our own selfishness. We suffer, we sacrifice, even to the point of death with Jesus. We endure much so we can have a New Life in the New World of the Lord not just for ourselves, but for our children. As St Augustine reminds us, we do not have children we have Christians. For if we do nothing more in our lives than lead our children to the Lord, then our lives have been a total success and have had infinite value.

*"Are you not aware that we who were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Through baptism into his death we were buried with him so that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father we too might live a new life." Romans 6:3-4.* That is from the first New Testament reading during the First Easter Mass, the solemn Easter Vigil. I love this reading. It reminds us that it isn't easy being a Christian, but it is worth the sacrifice. Our lives have meaning, and purpose and beauty because we are not satisfied with the shallow existence of materialism and self-gratification. Jesus has called us out of this darkness and death and given each of us the ability to make His presence real for others. If we just allow God to work through us, if we just strive to be that unique reflection of His love He created each of us to be, then we will come out of the tomb of selfishness this world buries us in and live eternally.

The tomb is empty, Mary Magdalene, sinner who lived it up and was dead in her sins. She found life by rejecting her sinful life. The tomb is empty Mary. But the world is full. The Savior Lives. May His life change the world. May we let His life change the world. For the world craves His New Life. And we need a New World.

He is risen! [He is risen indeed!] This must have been the exclamation that followed Simon Peter and John's visit to the tomb after hearing from Mary Magdalene that early, dark morning that we call resurrection day. Sometime in the night, something miraculous had occurred. Something had changed. When Mary came to the tomb and found the stone removed, she also found that Jesus was missing. And yet, there was evidence left behind. And that evidence is extremely important to the telling of the resurrection story, because when John and Peter went into the tomb, they did not believe or understand resurrection. When they came out, they may still not have understood, but they did believe. The scripture says literally, "he [John] saw and believed." But "they as yet did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead." John did not understand. But something made him believe.

So, what did John notice that made him believe?

He didn't see the angels that Mary saw after she remained weeping outside of the tomb. The two did not converse with the angels of God. They did not encounter Jesus personally at that point. After John and Peter had gone in and seen the empty cave, they returned home. Only Mary remained to deliver Jesus' message to the other "brothers" –disciples of the movement with the message, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

One might think that after Mary's encounter, the truth of Jesus' resurrection would be clear, all wrapped up. But it wasn't. First of all, Mary was a woman, and in Jesus' day, men tended to downplay the witness of women. It would be easy for them to say, she's imagining or emotional. It's therefore a miracle and a significant statement in itself that Jesus chose first to make himself known to a woman, to Mary Magdalene, a woman apparently with faith much deeper and more convicting than any of Jesus' other disciples. She is the first apostle, the first witness to the resurrection and to the risen Jesus. Even in resurrection, especially in resurrection, does Jesus turn the tables upside down on cultural expectations and the bias of his day. In delivering this message to Mary and appearing to her first, Jesus institutes and commissions his female disciples as worthy and equal for ministry and mission and gives a clear message of reminder to his disciples about the nature of the church: "The last shall be first."

Second of all, the guards would be told to escalate rumors that they had fallen asleep and that someone had moved Jesus' body. They hoped that many would believe this and squash the movement they thought died with Jesus. But this also doesn't make sense –because of what's left behind.

What is left behind?

Clothes. Burial cloths. Listen again to why John suddenly believed.

"The two were running together, but the other disciple [John] outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed."

The linen wrappings were lying there undisturbed as though someone simply had evaporated through them. If someone had moved the body, they would not have taken the time to unwrap it, nor would that have been a pleasant affair after what Jesus had gone through. Yet the wrappings remained, even though Jesus was missing from them.

In addition, the scriptures tell us that Jesus' head cloth not only remained but lay wrapped up in a separate place, as though someone had removed it and placed it there. It was not thrown or hastily discarded but placed carefully aside. We cannot know if that head wrapping was wrapped up and placed aside by the angels of God who also appeared to Mary or by Jesus himself as he rose before exiting the tomb into the garden. But the message is clear. He is risen!

And that message was not lost on John. He didn't understand it. But in that instant, he believed it!

The mystery of the cloths has enraptured people since that day, so much so that we gush over relics, believed to be the head cloths of Jesus, such as the Shroud of Turin or the Sudarium of Oviedo. These cloths were signs of that mystery, testimonies that a miracle had occurred. They were left behind for a reason, so that the disciples and others may believe!

They were designed to provoke faith in the eyes of beholders and for those who would come after them, those who would listen to the stories of the witnesses. And also believe.

The name for burial Jewish burial clothing was "tachrichim." At burial a man or woman would be buried immediately, so as to honor the dead. The body would first be washed with warm water, then fresh, clean white cloths, often treated as Jesus were with aloes and myrrh, would be wrapped around the body like an unseamed tunic. Often a man would also be buried with his tallit (his fringed personal tunic), but in Jesus' case, his seamless garment was bartered for between the guards at the time of his crucifixion. He would only have been wrapped in his white burial clothes. In addition to these, a face cloth would be wrapped around the face. Normally, this would be the man's own "sweat cloth," a large apron like towel that most men would carry with them often tied to their arms in order to wipe themselves in the heat of the day. Men would wrap these also around their heads to keep sweat from pouring into their eyes. At the time of the last supper, Jesus wrapped his around his waist and used it to wipe the feet of the disciples he washed.

Whether the head cloth Jesus was buried in was this very personal cloth of his own or whether one supplied by Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea at the time of his burial, it would have been a similar kind of cloth. And it would have been wrapped around his face, twisted, and tied at the head to secure the face for burial and soak up the blood still present from his death on the cross. For Jewish people, blood is part of one's life and body and must be preserved with the body at burial. In fact in cases of trauma at death Jewish law mandated the use of a sudarium to retrieve the victim's blood.<sup>[1]</sup> The name of this burial cloth was a soudarion, or in Latin sudarium. It was strictly against Jewish law to disturb a grave after burial. It was considered a desecration of the body if a grave were opened after burial. For this reason the grave would be often watched to make sure it would not be disturbed. The open tomb therefore would have been immediately traumatic for the disciples. The remaining grave cloths and sudarium therefore were key to their understanding that this was not a removal of the body but a vanishing of the body, not a desecration but a miracle!

The word for the head garment lying in a different place was the Greek "entylisso," which meant in this case "wrapped or twisted." Just as Jesus was wrapped in his gravecloths, at resurrection time, the sudarium was wrapped and placed aside, clearly as though someone had explicitly removed it and left it as a sign.

Often on Easter crosses, you will see a cross wrapped in a piece of cloth. This cloth is an important symbol of Jesus' resurrection. For in leaving behind these cloths, we know that a miracle has occurred.

Jesus resurrection is a miracle. It's a mystery that no one to date could ever or will ever solve by rational means or logical inquiry. Because faith is not logical. God does not exist as part of our

rational world. But God exists outside of all it in a realm that we will only know at the time of our own resurrection.

Faith means accepting the mystery and embracing the miracle.

HE is risen!

[HE is risen indeed!]

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[\[1\]](#) See [simplycatholic.com](http://simplycatholic.com)  
ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., , by Lori Wagner

Welcome on this Easter Sunday 2015 the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the

grave. This is the most important day in the year for Christians.

Unfortunately, tomorrow is the biggest day of the year for some golfers. It is the start of The Masters golf tournament in Augusta, Georgia.

You think I'm kidding about their relative importance? Years ago, Frank Chirkinian, the head of CBS Sports, discovered that The Masters and Easter Sunday happened on the same day that year. Upset at this conflict, he demanded of his colleagues, "Who sets the date of Easter? Didn't they realize that they scheduled it on The Masters weekend? Let's get to that person and have him change it." (1)

I don't know how they resolved that conflict. I'm pretty sure they didn't change the date for Easter though if they could, they probably would. Sports are a powerful force in our society.

You know by now how the drama of Easter unfolds. It begins two days earlier, on Good Friday. Jesus of Nazareth was crucified by the Roman authorities at the instigation of the religious authorities. He was nailed to a cross and a sword pierced his side. The soldiers affixed a sign above his head which read, "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." Death came rather swiftly and mercifully, after only about six hours. Some crucified men lingered for days, which has led some writers to propose that Christ died of a broken heart. After a Roman centurion confirmed his death, Pontius Pilate, the Roman Prefect for that territory, granted permission to a man named Joseph of Arimathea to claim his body.

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy and pious man, a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, who had become a follower of Jesus. Joseph was aided by a wealthy Pharisee by the name of Nicodemus. It was Nicodemus, you'll remember, who had come to Christ under the darkness of night to ask him about his teachings. It was to Nicodemus that Christ said that in order for him to enter the Kingdom of God, Nicodemus would have to be born all over again. Evidently the message took, for when Jesus' closest disciples had fled in fear, there was Nicodemus aiding Joseph of Arimathea in claiming Jesus' body. Carefully and with much effort they removed the nails from the Master's hands and feet and lowered him to the ground. Along with a group of women who had remained close by through it all, Joseph and Nicodemus hastily prepared Christ's body for burial.

They had to act quickly, these blessed saints who were there to minister to the mangled body of their Master. The Jewish Sabbath began on Friday evening and they would need to have him in the tomb with the tomb sealed before the Sabbath began. It most certainly is not how they would have preferred to have treated their Master. They were perhaps risking their lives in performing this act of love and honor. Certainly they were risking their reputations. That showed how much he meant to them. Indeed, he meant everything to them, and now to have to hurry through the burial preparations was salt in their own emotional wounds.

It is significant that they laid him in a borrowed grave. Jesus said on one occasion, "Foxes have dens and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head" (Luke 9:58). He owned no property on which to be buried. The tomb belonged to this same Joseph of Arimathea. Probably he had prepared it for his own burial.

Matthew, Mark and Luke tell us the tomb was “hewn out in the rock.” This would confirm Joseph’s wealth. Only royalty or wealthy individuals could afford to have their tombs carved out of a wall of stone or in the side of a mountain. Poorer men were buried in simple graves. (2)

A time-honored piece of humor says that a couple of weeks after the Resurrection, someone asked Joseph of Arimathea, “Why’d you let them bury Jesus in your brand new tomb?”

Joseph shrugged his shoulders and answered, “He only needed it for the weekend!”

Well, that’s true. He only needed it for the weekend. But the act was done. Christ now lay in the tomb and these devoted friends were back safely in their homes as they grieved and awaited the dawning of the first day of the week when they could take their time and anoint his body in a more appropriate way.

This all happened before Easter Sunday morning. And so we can appreciate the words with which John begins his description of that first Easter. He writes, “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . .”

What beautiful and significant words. “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark . . .” Would you agree with me that before the resurrection of Jesus, the world was a dark, dark place?

There was once a widely known Baptist preacher named Carlyle Marney. Marney once visited the campus of Duke University. A student asked, “Dr. Marney, would you say a word or two about the resurrection of the dead?”

Marney answered, “I will not discuss that with people like you.” The student was shocked and wanted to know why.

Marney said, “Look at you, in the prime of the life . . . Never have you known honest-to-God failure, heart-burn, impotency, solid defeat, brick walls, mortality. So what can you know of a dark world which only makes sense if Christ is raised?”

No wonder that story is so well known. It is a dark world which only makes sense if Christ be raised.

And so we read these words: “Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb . . .”

The darkness also speaks of the eagerness with which Mary of Magdala hastened to the tomb to perform this one last act of love for her Master. She had waited through the Sabbath and the dark hours before the dawning of Sunday morning. Now she could wait no longer. Remember there were no street lights to guide her feet. Surely she stumbled from time to time. But hers was a desperate journey. They had taken Christ at night. They had flogged him and he had endured a travesty of a trial. Then they hung him hurriedly on a cross. There had been no chance for her to tell him good- bye and then he was gone. Her grief was unspeakable.

Thus, early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb. When she arrived there, she saw that the stone had been removed from the

entrance to the tomb. This surely hit her like a punch in the gut. Her first reaction was that someone had stolen Christ’s body. Isn’t that interesting? Her first thought had not been that he had risen. This thought seems never to have occurred to her. I mean, dead people don’t rise from their graves, do

they? John tells us, “She came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!’”

Can you hear the panic in her voice? Remember when the airliner was shot down in the Eastern part of Ukraine last year? Remember how desperate families were to recover the physical remains of their loved ones? Sure, they understood that the bodies were now empty shells that no longer contained the spirits of their loved ones. They knew that, but they desperately needed the closure that only comes with respectfully disposing of their loved ones’ remains. Jesus’ body had been sealed in a tomb, but now it was gone. Who could have perpetrated such an act of desecration? Mary’s heart sank.

Peter and John were mystified. They began running toward the tomb. John got there first, but did not go in. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but, for some reason, didn’t go in. Simon Peter, of course, wasn’t so reticent. He went straight into the tomb. He also saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally John also went inside. “Our lesson says, “He saw and believed.” But then the writer adds, “They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.”

In other words, it was still dark that first Easter morning. The disciples were in the dark just like everyone else. And Mary Magdalene who loved the Master so much was completely in the dark as well, and her heart was breaking.

It’s a dark world without Easter. No truer statement can be made.

The fifth century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus tells an anecdote about Xerxes, the mighty king of Persia, who is prominent in the book of Esther.

In 480 B.C. Xerxes invaded Greece with an army of nearly two million men. Seeing the whole Hellespont filled with the vessels of his fleet, and the plains covered with his regiments, Xerxes at first congratulated himself on his good fortune and abilities. But then, a few moments later, he began to weep. His stunned uncle Artabanus, standing beside him, asked what a man in his position could possibly have to cry about. The king replied that he had just realized that in a hundred years’ time, all these men arrayed before him, every one of the soldiers and sailors with whose help he had terrified the known world, would be dead. (3) And this made this strong king cry.

Without Easter, what else is there to do when we contemplate the loss of someone we love but to cry? Without Easter, there is no hope of being reunited with them.

There is a beautiful story about comedienne Gracie Allen and the importance of life beyond the grave. I realize that many younger members of our congregation never had the chance to see George Burns and Gracie Allen together. They were one of America’s favorite comedy teams for more than four decades in vaudeville, films, radio and television. They were also deeply in love. Gracie died in 1964. George Burns, of course, didn’t die until 32 years later at the age of 100.

When Gracie died, George was devastated. One of the things that George kept close to him following her death was a love note that always encouraged him. The note said: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” (4)

“Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” Such a sentiment makes no sense without Easter. Without Easter there is no concrete evidence of life beyond the grave. This is what most

bothers many people who demand scientific evidence. There is no such thing with concern to life beyond the grave. Oh, we can infer evidence.

For example, biologists tell us that every five to seven years our bodies deteriorate. And yet this process does not destroy us. Millions of our cells die and are almost immediately replaced. In a sense, we have a completely new body every five to seven years. And yet, our personalities go on. Why should that which happens instantaneously, which we call physical death, do any more to destroy the soul of a person than that which is occurring every moment that we live? (5) Still, there is no hard scientific evidence of immortality. Without Easter, there is only blind speculation.

Pastor Jerry Jones tells about a Christian man and his wife who lost their young son in a tragic accident on Good Friday in 1996. The boy's funeral was on Easter Sunday. During the memorial service the father got up and shared with his family and friends that Easter had taken on a new importance. "Until you stare death eye-to-eye," he began sobbing, "Easter is just a word. It's a nice day with bunny rabbits and eggs . . . but when someone so precious to you dies, Easter becomes everything . . . an anchor in a fierce storm . . . a rock on which to stand . . . a hope that raises you above despair and keeps you going." (6)

It's a dark, dark world without Easter. On the other hand, with Easter, we see hope bursting forward with every blossom of springtime.

I was amused to read about an elementary school class that was taking a test. One question was, "Upon what do hibernating animals subsist during the winter?"

One child wrote, "All winter long hibernating animals subsist on the hope of the coming spring." (7)

That may not have been the answer the teacher was looking for, but that doesn't keep it from having a ring of truth. We do subsist on hope. It is built into every fiber of our being.

Dr. Jane McAdams, a medical doctor, was shocked to the core when her 68-year-old mother was diagnosed with progressive lymphoma. Doctors gave her less than a month to live. When Dr. McAdams came to break the news, she found the elderly woman looking through a sales catalogue. Her mother, a legendary penny-pincher, pointed out a very expensive summer purse and announced that she wanted that purse for her birthday.

Dr. McAdams realized that her mother wasn't asking for the purse; she was asking how long she would live. Would she live long enough to use a summer purse?

That day, Dr. McAdams decided not to tell her mother the diagnosis. Instead, she went out and bought the most expensive summer purse she could find. And every year since then, she's bought her mother a fancy purse. At the time of her writing, Dr. McAdams' mother was about to celebrate her 83<sup>rd</sup> birthday. (8) There is amazing power in hope, is there not? Hope is what Easter is all about. Without Easter this is a dark, dark world. With Easter, hope bursts forward with every blossom of springtime.

And this leads me to say one last thing: thank God for Easter. I said that we don't have scientific evidence for life beyond the grave, but we do have historical evidence. The respected theologian and author, Wolfhart Pannenberg once said, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live."

He's right, of course. The testimony of those who experienced Christ's resurrection is so compelling that the only real reason a person might reject it is that it might require them to make a change in how they are living. That is the right, of course, of those who reject it. It is sad, but they are free to reject the Good News of Easter if they so choose. As for me, and, I suspect for you, we will leave this place with "hallelujah!" ringing in our ears and in our hearts. Jesus is alive, and because he lives we shall live, too. Easter is God's light beaming into a dark, dark world. Because Christ lives, the world is brighter than it has ever been before.

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King Duncan

## IV

A family was watching a movie of the life of Jesus on television. Their six-year-old daughter was deeply moved as the movie maker realistically portrayed Jesus' crucifixion and death. Tears ran down the little girl's face as they took him from the cross and lay him in a borrowed tomb. She watched as a guard was placed outside the tomb. And then suddenly a big smile broke on her face. She bounced up on the arm of the chair and said with great anticipation, "Now comes the good part."

That's why we are here this day, is it not? To celebrate the good part of the last days of Jesus' pilgrimage on earth. To give thanks for Christ's victory over sin and death. To join our voices with millions of his followers around the world this day to sing, "Jesus Christ is risen today!"

To complete our celebration I would ask us to focus on these words from John's Gospel, "Mary Magdalene came early to the tomb, while it was still dark." In other words, she came to the tomb before daybreak. John was simply reporting the facts. And yet, there is another way these words might be interpreted. After all, the writers of the New Testament as well as Jesus himself often used the imagery of darkness and light to signify something else. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. Darkness could refer to a world without Christ, a world without hope, a world of sin and death, a world where God's promises had been forgotten and God's people felt forsaken.

Darkness is much more than the absence of sunlight. Darkness is a spiritual condition in which the presence of God is no longer felt.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. On Friday, her Master had been crucified. Nails pierced his hands and his feet. A sword had been thrust in his side. Mary Magdalene watched him die a horrible death. Afterward, they laid her precious Lord in a borrowed tomb. How could this be? This was the man who had come to redeem Israel. How could this be? She could not understand. Where was God in all this?

A young boy grew up in a military family. His father would often regale him with tales of military triumphs. One day in Sunday School, the boy's teacher gave a graphic account of Christ's death on the cross. The boy listened in astonishment. During a pause, the excited lad shouted, "Well, what I want to know is, where were the Marines?"

Mary Magdalene probably wondered the same thing. Where were the Marines? Or the ten thousand angels? And where was God? Was there no one to stop this awful miscarriage of justice? The light of Mary's world had been extinguished.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark. There is something about darkness, isn't there? Which is your favorite month? January or April? There is an illness that some people suffer that causes them to get depressed in the absence of light. The disease is not all that rare. In fact, Dr. Michael Gitlin, a specialist in this illness, says that many persons who suffer from the so-called "winter blahs" might benefit from a combination of drug treatment and exposure to light. "We're now finding that light may augment the response to antidepressant drugs," says Dr. Gitlin. "Some people experience depression according to seasonal patterns. These are people who get depressed when the days get shorter." What these folks need, says Dr. Gitlin, is light.

While it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. That darkness was not only physical it was spiritual as well. .

Back in 1903, Guy Thornton wrote a book titled WHEN IT WAS DARK. Subtitled THE STORY OF THE GREAT CONSPIRACY, it graphically describes the moral collapse that would occur if the world were suddenly to discover that the resurrection of Jesus was a hoax. The climax of the novel tells what happened the day after people heard the news that Christ never rose. The results were horrible, although in the end the conspiracy was exposed and the villain carried off to an asylum. (1)

A world without Christ would be a dark world indeed. Imagine our nation with its Christian hospitals closed, its Christian Universities, its shelters for the homeless. Imagine people with no basis for moral decision making " families who never prayed together. Imagine a world without Handel's MESSIAH " a world without altars at which to marry our young and bury our old. Imagine a society with no sense of spiritual purpose and undergirding. Of course, some would argue that we already have such a society. How sad. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb while it was still dark.

## HAVE YOU EVER COME TO THE TOMB OF SOMEONE YOU LOVE WHILE IT WAS STILL DARK?

Sooner or later all of us do.

The composer Giuseppe Verdi knew about that darkness. You can see it in his operas. For example, in his opera RIGOLETTO the ill-starred court jester mourns the death of his beloved wife. And his opera LA TRAVIATA ends with the expiring heroine vowing that she will look after her dear Alfredo from heaven.

Verdi himself had walked the dark corridors of bereavement in his mid-twenties. Three years in succession he lost his infant son, then his infant daughter, and finally his devoted wife. The father-child relationship comes up often in the Verdi operas, perhaps because their composer never got over the loss of his own children. He would eventually marry again, but he was never again blessed with children. In his art, Verdi confronted the problem of this final separation from dear ones with prayer. A number of his operas conclude with a prayer for reconciliation and personal reunion beyond the rupture of death. (2)

Mary Magdalene went to the tomb while it was still dark. Some of you have been there. BUT FORTUNATELY THAT IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY. When she reached the tomb, she found the stone rolled away" and the body gone. Vanished. The tomb, empty. What was going on here? she wondered. What had they done with him?

I'm reminded of something humorous that happened to Robert Rankin while he was a student at the Junior College of Mason City, Iowa. Rankin aspired to a theatrical career. He was only a stagehand with a one-line acting part, but it was a time of glory for his little stage troupe. In a one-act detective thriller, they had gained supremacy in a regional drama contest and marched off to the finals at the University of Iowa.

In Iowa City they encountered two unexpected problems: the timing of the trip made it impossible for them to have a dress rehearsal, and the stage assigned to them was smaller than the one in which they had rehearsed and performed. In addition to his work as a stagehand, Rankin was to play a policeman. His part was confined to one line" a question. The action proceeded on stage, including the obligatory murder, which prompted a call for the police. Now it was Rankin's turn. He rushed in on cue. Unfortunately, because of the smaller stage he stumbled over the corpse, and fell flat on his face. He arose with as much dignity as he could muster, and, ignoring the corpse over which he had just fallen, delivered his one line: "Where's the body?" (3)

Where's the body? Mary Magdalene wondered and fear gripped her soul. Had his enemies stolen his body? Mary rushed to find the disciples. When they confirmed her discovery, she was all the more confused. She stood outside the tomb weeping. As she wept, she stooped and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head, and one at the feet, where the body of Jesus had been lying. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him." When she had said this, she turned around, and beheld Jesus standing there, but she did not recognize him. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away." And then it happened. Jesus spoke her name. "Mary!" Mary Magdalene turned and said to Him in Hebrew, "Rabboni!" (which means, Teacher). And she rushed forward to hold him in her arms. Jesus said to her, "Stop clinging to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brethren, and say to them, I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God." Mary Magdalene did as she was told. She announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

That, of course is the rest of the story. Christ, who was dead, was now alive. Pardon the shameless play on words, but it is so appropriate. Mary Magdalene had come to the tomb while it was still dark, but now the Son was risen. Isn't that the message of Easter when you come down to it? In the midst of our darkness the Son always rises. There is hope. There is promise. The Son of God has risen. We're told that if you are very alert as you walk through the great old city of Edinburgh, Scotland, you'll notice a tiny alleyway, hardly wide enough for two persons to pass. Over it is the carving of a

