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NAMES OF WONDROUS LOVE – THE LIGHT

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I'm not a big fan of winter for various reasons. One of them is that the days are so short and some days there is very little light. I don't like to get up in the morning and drive when it is totally dark. Not only is it dark but it is very cold as well. I think that most people will prefer light and heat. The calendar tells us that spring has arrived. I'm not sure that the weather is following the calendar, but it will be spring soon. There will be more daylight, the birds will be singing, the grass will be getting green, flowers will be popping up and the Tigers will be playing baseball. I like that.

I'm ready for Easter. For the last 40 days we have been in the solemn season of Lent. Lent is a wonderful time for preaching. This year we have studied some of the names of wondrous love for our Savior Jesus. We have seen our sins that led him to do what needed to be done. He came into the world to be our substitute. He would take the sin of the world upon himself and pay the ransom price for our sins by giving his life on the cross. This past Friday we saw the ultimate sacrifice as he willingly laid down his life. Darkness covered the earth for three hours as Jesus was punished for our sins. We see the darkness of our sin and what it took to take it away.

Lent is a wonderful time for preaching, but Lent is not the end. Today we drive out of the Lenten darkness into the glorious light of Easter. Today is a day of joy and comfort as we see that our Lord Jesus Christ has come forth from the tomb and destroyed the power of death forever. Today we see the NAME OF WONDROUS LOVE – THE LIGHT!

Most congregations will experience the biggest crowds of the year on Easter Sunday. Some will come for the right reasons, to celebrate our Lord's victory. Others will come for the wrong reasons, perhaps simply wanting to avoid some sort of family confrontation. It's easier to sit through a service than spoil the whole day. Many may not think of a personal application of the Easter message. After all, we live in a world where we are simply treated as faceless numbers and not all that many people really care about us. The Easter message is for you as an individual and God himself wants you to know that.

She certainly had her share of problems to say the least. Her name was Mary. That was a common name. She was an uncommon person. St. Luke tells us that Jesus had driven seven demons out of her. Not one, but seven. It will do us no good to start speculating about what those demons drove her to do, but it wouldn't be good. Jesus saved her life, and she would follow him. She was one of a number of women who helped to support Jesus and the apostles by their works and offerings. Jesus did not simply snap his fingers for miracles at mealtime. He allowed his people to serve him in gratitude and love.

We hear about Mary Magdalene especially in the Good Friday and Easter accounts. She was there at the foot of the cross along with John, Jesus' mother, and other women. She knew what Jesus had done for her. Her heart was moved by grief and pain as her friend, her Lord, her Savior was taken down from the cross and placed into a tomb. It all happened so quickly that Jesus body wasn't even anointed with spices for burial as was the custom. She hoped that could be corrected. She hoped that the Roman soldiers might be willing to move the stone covering the front of the tomb.

When she arrived, she saw that the stone had been moved away. It was lying flat. Something had happened and she feared the worst. She ran back to Jerusalem and Peter and John and sobbed, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

Mary found herself in total darkness. The tears were flowing down her cheeks. She felt crushed and overwhelmed. Things had gone from bad to worse. It wasn't merely that her Lord had been brutally murdered by people who hated him as they carried out their treacherous plot in the middle of the night before anyone knew what was going on. Now his body had been stolen. It would have been better if she simply could have anointed his body with spices, but now? What kind of sick, perverted people could have done such a thing? She had come "while it was still dark." That was not merely the time of day. It reflected the feeling in her soul.

We've all been there, haven't we? Haven't you felt the darkness when you have had to bury a loved one and returned to grieve again and again? You've felt the gloom as you struggle with life and your bills and your health and your family and your job and your future. You're still troubled by sins that took place many years ago and you struggle with the same temptations over and over again. Are you looking for the light? Keep following Mary's story!

God gave Noah the promise: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease." Winter must give way to spring. Night must give way to day. And so, it is with our spiritual lives as well! Despair must give way to joy! Little by little, the darkness gives way to the gray dawn.

One thing that everybody knows about Easter is that the body of Christ was not in the tomb. If the body was in the tomb, there would be no Easter. So, you have to come up with some sort of rational explanation of what happened to the body. The first and obvious explanation was that someone had to steal the body. But who would do such a thing? Most people would say that the disciples did. What would they have to gain by spreading the lie that Jesus had risen from the dead? Sadly, these were men who were paralyzed with fear. When Jesus was arrested, they all ran away. When Jesus was crucified, they were nowhere to be found. Peter, their leader, was last seen crying bitterly because he had denied knowing his Lord three times. These were not Navy SEALs or commandos who would plan an intricate plan to knock out the Roman soldiers guarding the tomb, filling them with fear.

The enemies of Jesus would have nothing to do with the missing body either. That is the very thing they were trying to prevent. Their leaders went to Pilate after the crucifixion and demanded that the tomb be guarded and made secure. It would be sealed and guarded by men armed with swords, clubs, and shields. They wanted Jesus securely in the tomb. They saw him as an enemy and deceiver of the people. They saw Jesus as a threat to their power. They were afraid of something happening on the third day. Once Sunday had come and gone, they could get back to business as usual. They would point the people to Jesus' false claim of a resurrection.

The thing is that the enemies of Jesus were the only ones thinking of a resurrection. Jesus had told the apostles that he would go to Jerusalem to suffer and die and that he would rise again on the third day. The light would begin to dawn on that Easter day. A number of women would claim to have met the risen Jesus that morning. They reported seeing angels at the tomb asking them why they looked for the living among the dead. He was not there. He had risen, just as he said. That afternoon Peter would see him. Two disciples on the way to Emmaus would see him as well. The light was beginning to shine.

And then morning would come! Mary would return to the tomb. The first time she saw the stone rolled away. This time she actually looked into the tomb and saw the two angels who were there. They asked her why she was crying. She was hurt and confused. She needed the light of the Son, the Son of God who had victory over death.

All of a sudden, he was there. He asks her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it that you are looking for?" She thinks that it must be the caretaker or gardener. Does he know anything? Can he shed some light on her darkness?

All it takes is a single word: "Mary!" The darkness vanishes. The tears dry up. The weight is lifted from her heart. Light fills the eyes of her heart. This is her Lord! This is her Savior! This is her God! This is her Jesus!

Jesus came to Mary personally. He, the Creator of the universe, he, the one who would take away the sin of the world, would have time for a single individual. Do you think that Mary is the only one? No, he comes to you as well. This is the risen Christ. The wounds in his hands, feet and side are still visible. They are the glorious scars that tell us of his wonderful love. He is not a ghost. He is not a figment of your imagination. He is not a dream you had on Saturday night. He is the Living One. He is the one who rose from the dead just as he promised, just as the Scriptures had promised.

If that is true and it is, then Jesus is exactly who he claimed to be. He is the Christ, the Anointed One. He is our Prophet, our High Priest, and our King. He is God with Us. He is the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world. He is the Good Shepherd. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He is the Bread of Life and the Resurrection. We can believe every promise that he makes because he cannot lie. He is with us always to the very end of the age. Our sins have been taken away completely.

Yes, God the Father accepted the sacrifice of his Son on Good Friday for the sin of the world. You don't ever have to worry whether you've done enough to get right with God. Jesus has done it all for you. The payment of his holy, precious blood was sufficient. Satan's head has been crushed. He can no longer harm us. The victory is ours through Christ.

Finally, we know that we too will rise. We don't have to be afraid of death. Jesus went down into the scary pit of death and returned. He tells us not to fear. When we take our last earthly breath, the angels will carry our souls to the presence of Jesus. When he returns to judge the world, our bodies will be raised and glorified and reunited with our souls.

This is our joy. Jesus tells us: "I am the LIGHT of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life." In a little while we will sing our closing hymn. It does not say, "I really wish that my Redeemer lives!" It does not say, "I hope that my Redeemer lives!" It says, "I know that my Redeemer lives!" He is my redeemer. He saved me personally. He assures me of his love personally and individually just as he did Mary Magdalene. He gives me his body and his blood, given and shed for my sin.

The light has dawned. Jesus has risen! This is our day to celebrate! Agnostics, atheists, and unbelievers have their own day. It was last week. It's called April Fool's Day. We have Easter, the feast of our Lord's resurrection. Alleluia! Jesus lives! AMEN.