I want to welcome each and every one of you for coming to celebrate Easter here at Bethany. Now I know some of you came today just because it is Easter, and that’s just what you do on Easter – go to church. Some of you came today under duress – because someone told you that you had to. But others of you may have come today to hear a resurrection story. If that is the case, you will not be disappointed. Because you have already heard THE resurrection story as it is told in the Gospel of John, but I think if you listen carefully today, you will hear others, as well.

Now knowing there would be such a diversity of outlooks on this day, I felt a little anticipation as I began to prepare the sermon - well perhaps anxiety would be a better word. I wanted to say something that would speak to everyone – from persons who have heard the story at least once a year for their entire lives to someone who may be hearing it for the first time. So I wondered what words I could say that would convey the profundness of the resurrection on a day when most of us are distracted by the other trappings of the day – new clothes, new shoes, Easter egg hunts, candy, or the ham that needs to be put in the oven as soon as you get home. More importantly, I wondered what words of hope could be spoken to those for whom today is just like any other day – another day of dealing with the same old problems that never seemed to be resolved.

All these things were going through my mind the first time I read the text for this morning. But a funny thing happened. Here was this beautiful Easter story, but try as I might, I couldn’t get past the first sentence. I read, “Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb,” and then I stopped. I tried to read on to get to the meat of the message – the discovery of the empty tomb, the confusion of Mary and the disciples, the angels, the Gardener, Mary’s realization that Jesus was not dead, but had risen from the grave – but I was stuck on one phrase.....“while it was still dark.”

Now I was assuming John probably wrote this statement to reference the time of day, just a minor detail to set the scene, but since I could not get past it, I had to wonder why God kept thwarting my progress. And that’s when it dawned on me (pardon the pun), the darkness John was talking
about was not just the physical darkness we experience before sunrise, but it was spiritual darkness as well.

You see, on that first Easter morning things looked very bleak to Mary Magdalene. Mary had been with Jesus almost from the beginning of his ministry. She had seen lives changed, bodies healed, and eyes opened. But on Friday, just a few days before, Jesus had been crucified. Nails had been driven into his hands and feet. A sword had pierced his side. Mary had stood at the foot of the cross helplessly while he was killed, and her heart was broken. How could this have happened? This was the man who had come to save Israel. Where was God in all of this? That morning, as she came to the tomb, probably to anoint his body for burial, her heart was heavy and in her soul, "...it was still dark."

Mary was probably wondering, “What will I do now?” Peter and the other disciples could probably go back to their old lives again – fishing, tax collecting, families, but what about her? Remember Mary is the woman from whom Jesus cast out seven demons. She didn’t have a life she wanted to go back to. More importantly, what was she going to do without Jesus – her friend and Savior and the work they had been doing together. Sadness, disappointment, and emptiness consumed her. Her soul languished in spiritual darkness.

Most of us can probably relate to Mary because we have all had days when we stand with our dreams in shambles around our feet. Our children go astray. Our marriage is crumbling. We get a pink slip from our employer, or worse still, the test that comes back from the lab is positive. We ask, "Why me, Lord?" My life was going so well and now this darkness.

My friends, what we must all understand is that it is easy to believe while everything is all sunlight and happiness, but very difficult to believe while it is still dark. It is easy to believe God is for us when life is good, but when it turns sour the natural inclination is to feel rejected, guilty, or abandoned. Anyone can walk in the sunshine; only the faithful can walk in the dark. But the fact is, no one experiences only sunshine – and I would remind you that all sunshine and with no dark clouds to make rain produces a desert, not a garden (http://day1.org/4649-while_it_was_still_dark).

But back to that morning in the garden at the tomb... Mary believed in Jesus with all her heart, yet she had not thought it would end this way. BUT, all was not as it seemed because even though it was still dark, Jesus had already risen. How do we know this? Because we are told the tomb was
empty. God’s plan for Mary’s life was still moving forward, she just could not see it.

This reminds me of a story related to the Battle of Waterloo. It was June 18, 1815. The French were under the command of Napoleon. The Allies (consisting of the British, Dutch, and Germans) were under the command of the Duke of Wellington. At that time, Britain depended on a system of semaphore signals to convey the latest news from the battlefield. One of these signal stations was on the tower of Winchester Cathedral.

Late in the day on the 18th it flashed the signal: "W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N-DE-F-E-A-T-E-D- -" But at that precise moment one of those clouds of fog London is so prone to rolled in and blocked out the signal. The news of defeat quickly spread throughout the city. The whole countryside was sad and gloomy when they heard their country had lost the war. But just as suddenly as it came, the fog lifted, and the remainder of the message could then be read. It consisted of four words, not two. The complete message was: "W-E-L-L-I-N-G-T-O-N-DE-F-E-A-T-E-D-TH-E-N-E-M-Y!"

It took only a few minutes for the good news to spread. Sorrow was turned into joy, defeat was turned into victory! (http://www.faithanglicanchurch.org/sermons/032208.htm)

This is exactly what happened to Mary that first Easter morning – all was not as it seemed, and figuratively, the fog lifted when Jesus called her by name. Sorrow was turned into joy, defeat turned into victory, darkness was overcome by light. Mary had a new lease on life.

It is the same for us when we stumble through periods of spiritual darkness. Jesus is there, whether we can see him or not. God’s plan for our lives is still moving forward, even when we cannot see a way forward, if only we believe.

Although I have seen many individual metaphorical resurrections such as Mary’s, in the time I have left I want to share with you the resurrection story of this Body of Christ, Bethany UMC. Because it is the best example I can give of keeping the faith while it is still dark and watching sorrow turn to joy before our very eyes.

If you are familiar with this congregation you know Bethany has a long and beautiful history of being a warm and welcoming church with a commitment to serving the community. Though once a thriving congregation, just a few years ago, the future of this church looked pretty bleak – attendance was down, there were few young adults or children so the average age was up
close to 60, service was still a priority, but the faithful few were tired and discouraged. When I came, it appeared my job just might be to come and anoint the body for burial. But all what not as it seemed....

While it was still dark and attendance was down....we were invited to participate in the Small Church Initiative revitalization process.

While it was still dark and it seemed that a good number of our core saints had gone on to glory, young adults and children began to come and breathe new life into the church.

While it was still dark and we didn’t know how we were going to pay the electric bill to keep the lights on, the church reached down and funded outreach initiatives like vacation bible school for the children in our neighborhood and the cold weather shelter for the homeless in our community.

My friends, look around! Attendance is up, the average age is down and new life is evident in this body. Bethany is living proof that the Risen Christ was with us even in the dark! We are being resurrected! “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:55 NRSV)

Now this collective resurrection would not be possible without the transformation of individual members. So today, if you are in one of those spiritually dark places (and we all are at one time or another), I want you to know there is hope and remember the first verse of our text today....because we know that while it was still dark, Jesus had already risen. Jesus was there with Mary in the darkness that first Easter morning. The tomb was empty. The Son had risen. Death had been defeated. It no longer had or has the last word. It did not for Mary and does not for us.

John, the writer of our text this morning knew this, so he gave us these words of hope at the very beginning of his Gospel: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it!” (John 1:5)

The Lord has risen! The Lord has risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.