I have been re-reading favorite novels these days. In doing so, I came across the image of a little girl, sitting with her mother of sorts on the side of a mountain, the two of them feasting on the first ripe peaches of the season. When she has sucked the sweet flesh from the stone pit and covered her arms and face in the sticky peach juices, the little girl looks up at the older woman wondering what to do now.

The older woman suggests that the girl plant the pit just there in the ground, close to the mother tree. The girl does so with delight and the two of them go home to bed. In the morning, the little girl rises early and dashes out of the house. The woman finds her sitting by the little grave where she had buried the peach stone with tears in her eyes. With no experience of growing trees or their fruit, the young girl had expected a new peach tree with more fresh peaches to have grown overnight from her buried pit.

When I read that I thought, yes, I know that feeling. I know the feeling of wanting to fast forward through the waiting and the hard parts of this COVID-19 experience--and of life in general. I know the feeling too of realizing how poor I am at actually seeing the future, despite my often overzealous mind trying to divine it through worry alone. I want to know what will happen next, and I want to make sense of what’s happening now. But I’m not sure that’s something humans are too good at doing at least in the middle of whatever’s going on. Later, when the deeds are done we can tell the stories, we can sing the songs, and we can try to learn from the lessons of our history. But that comes later. Often much later.

Folks like me who have grown up with the Easter story already know how it ends. We know that even though Jesus is crucified on Friday he rises on Sunday. But this week I was reminded that those first followers didn’t know that yet. Jesus had tried to clue them in to what he was about to do. But it seems they didn’t realize what he was saying until after it was all over. And so, “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.”

Why did she come? In John it doesn’t say. Did she come to anoint the body? As women often did? Did she come to face her grief or ground her shock? Did she come because she knew not what else to do but was simply choosing what she felt was the next right thing? I don’t know, but the story in John says she came not knowing the end of the story. She came to the tomb while it was yet dark.

Faith in Jesus might be understood as trusting that we do know the end of the story and that we can live and die in peace knowing that we too will experience new life even after death. But I don’t think that completely takes away the pain of suffering or grief. Maybe it just helps make it bearable.
I’ve read that we’re experiencing a collective grief right now. We’re grieving the deaths from this virus and other ills of life. We’re grieving the loss of jobs and income and the explosion of already staggering economic inequality. We’re grieving the sacrifices of time, energy, and safety healthcare and other workers are making. We’re grieving the loss of in-person community that we find in church and school and the workplace and at the hairdresser and in restaurants and at concerts, sports, and art events large and small. Maybe we’re also grieving our own limitations and vulnerabilities. What else? I’m sure there’s something I’m missing.

Some of you are familiar with the stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—and the ways these stages don’t tend to follow a neat, orderly progression but often circle back around on themselves however they please. I see some of those stages in Mary even in this short scene. I remember she knows what it’s like to feel unspeakable grief.

And so, “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.” She saw that the stone had been rolled away. She ran and got Peter and the “other disciple whom Jesus loved.” They all saw the linen wrappings lying there. She saw the angels. And still, still she grieved. It’s okay to grieve. It’s okay to be patient with your grief—even if people around you cluelessly ask you why you’re weeping.

The way I see it, Mary Magdalene is the first ever preacher of the good news of Christ rising on that Sunday morning. The way I see it she had to grieve and grieve and cry her eyes out until she could see him, the risen Christ, standing right before her.

I can’t see the future, but I do know that grief takes time. I do know that recovering our health can take time. I do know that adjusting to any real change can take time.

Like Mary Magdalene, this Easter we come to the tomb while it is yet dark. If not individually, then globally, our way ahead is hard to see. None of us remember what it was like to be born. None of us remember that waiting—at least not from the inside. Maybe if we did, we would be better prepared for such times of uncertainty. Maybe if we did, we would remember that we do have practice waiting in the dark, while a change we cannot yet understand is being worked all around us. To quote the Sikh, activist, and mother Valerie Kaur, “What if this [uncertain time] is not the darkness of the tomb but the darkness of the womb?”

Yes, the shadow of death is passing over us all in the form of a global pandemic but what if there is also something being born? What if our job now is only to wait as patiently as we can, attending to our challenges and our grief with as much kindness as we can? What if our job is not to strategically plan for an unknown future or to rush ourselves past our very real feelings but rather to rise as we are able, while it is yet dark, do the next right thing right in front of us, and wait for the arrival of the new life Jesus Christ taught us is always being born?

For indeed, we know how the story ends. Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.