

“Easter Tears”
John 20:1-18
Easter Sunday

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Westminster, Greenville
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There’s a book that came out many years ago called *Children’s Letters to God*. As you might imagine, it’s a book that speaks not only to kids, but to just about anyone.

Here are some examples:

Dear God,
I bet it is very hard for you to love all of everybody in the whole world. There are only 4 people in our family and I can never do it.

Dear God,
Thank you for the baby brother,
but what I prayed for was a puppy.

Dear God,
Maybe Cain and Abel would not kill each other so much if they had their own room. It works with my brother.

Dear God,
Is it true that my father won’t get into Heaven if he uses his Bowling Words in the house?

What’s fascinating about these letters is that while they appear to be random, many seem to have a consistent theme, a question behind the question:

God...why do you behave the way you do?

It's particularly true when the subject raised by a child is not fighting with a sibling or words Daddy shouldn't say...but the subject of life and death.

For example...

Dear God,

Instead of letting people die and having to make new ones, why don't you just keep the ones you got now?¹

That one was written by Jane, but it's probably not too far from the question that was on Mary's mind, on that first Easter long ago.

God, why couldn't you keep Jesus alive?

How could you let him die?

Why do you behave the way you do?

In our Easter text for today, John writes:

“Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.”

John is the only Gospel writer who describes the GRIEF that was still present on Easter morning. Remember, that first Easter long ago began not with fanfare and trumpets and hundreds of church members singing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today!”

Easter began with a missing body.

With unanswered questions.

With grieving disciples and friends.

“As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at

¹ Stuart Hample and Eric Marshall, *Children's Letters to God*, New York: Workman Publishing, 1991.

the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

Why is she weeping?

What kind of a question is that...at a tomb??!

Then Mary turns around, sees the risen Jesus, does not recognize him as the risen Jesus...and hears the same question:

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Now let’s pause right there.

It’s not just a curious question, this business of why are you weeping...

It’s also a curious way to address Mary, don’t you think?

First the angels call her, “Woman...”

as if these angels don’t know who she is—

and then the risen Jesus calls her, “Woman...”

as if Jesus doesn’t know who she is!?!??

What’s going on here?

Let’s do a little Bible study this morning.

If any of you are familiar with John’s Gospel, you know that the Gospel writer John loves to work on multiple levels: what’s happening ABOVE the surface, and what’s happening BELOW the surface.

Go back to the beginning of John’s Gospel for a moment.

Do you recall how John’s Gospel begins?

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God...”

Beautiful way to begin a Gospel—that’s what’s on the surface.
But look more closely.
In the beginning...what else does that remind you of in the Bible?

The book of Genesis, right?
How does Genesis begin?

“In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...”

John, when he wrote his Gospel, was echoing Genesis, and wants us to remember Genesis, at various points along the way.

Genesis says:
“...darkness covered the face of the deep...Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light.”

And what does John write in the fifth verse of his Gospel?
“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

You can hear the echo, right?

John is writing his Gospel, in part, as if it’s a **NEW GENESIS**.
A whole new **START TO CREATION** in the story of Jesus Christ.

So...when we come to John’s version of Easter, the fact that the angels and the risen Jesus both address Mary as “Woman” is no accident.

Recall Genesis one more time:

“Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman...’”

When the angels and Jesus address Mary as “Woman,” it’s another echo of Genesis!

Below the surface, John wants us to remember Eve...because in the original Hebrew in which Genesis was written, the word “Eve” resembles the Hebrew word for “living”.

Mary, in other words, is not just Mary Magdalene at this moment. She stands for all living people at this moment. Below the surface, she is...each of you.

She stands for all the times that YOU have cried at a graveside. Or in your car, by yourself, because you didn’t want anyone else to see the depths of your pain and your grief.

ALL THAT is wrapped up in Mary’s Easter tears.

Now—if you’ll stay with this thought just a moment longer, there’s at least one other scene in Genesis that Mary’s tears are meant to remind us of...and that’s the end of Genesis.

Do you recall the story at the end of Genesis?
The story of Joseph and his brothers?

His brothers were jealous of Joseph and threw Joseph into a pit. Then they sold him to Midianites, who sold him to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Listen again to the end of that story.

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, “he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it...”

When he sees his younger brother, Benjamin, Joseph “fell upon...Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck.”

And at the very end of Genesis, there’s this beautiful scene of reconciliation.

Joseph forgives his brothers.

“Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept...”

I mean, the end of Genesis is just AWASH in tears.

But they are not tears of hopelessness.

They are tears of new relationships, a new BEGINNING...

Which is what Mary’s tears are intended to remind us of as well.

Not only the endings we grieve in this life, but the new beginnings that God gives us in the risen Christ...

Back in the summer of 1982, Peter Storey was the president of the South African Council of Churches in Johannesburg. Desmond Tutu was serving as its general secretary.

One day, these two giants of the anti-apartheid movement traveled 300 miles north to try to help three Lutheran priests who had been imprisoned by South Africa’s government.

When they arrived, they were lied to...they were told weren’t any prisoners there, and that a small group of militia would escort them back home.

Well, a little way into their return trip, those militia decided to take a detour, and forced Storey and Tutu's vehicle off the road and into the African bush. Tutu and Storey were ordered to get out of their car, guns pointed at them.

A cold fear came over Peter Storey.
He knew that this could be the day that he would die.

But for whatever reason, the soldiers did not kill Storey and Tutu. After intimidation and threats, they told them to get back in the car.

The militia headed back the way they came.
Tutu and Storey also drove the opposite direction, as far and as fast as they could.

After a bit of silence, Desmond Tutu said:
"Peter, we nearly died back there. They could have shot us as easily as swatting a fly! We must thank God for preserving our lives..."

And immediately, Desmond Tutu launched into prayer in the car.

Peter Storey became a bit nervous, however, because when he glanced over at his friend, who was both driving and praying at the same time, he saw that both of Tutu's eyes were tightly shut in prayer!

Now Peter Storey is a person of great faith.

But he's not about to say, "Jesus, take the wheel!" at a moment like that...so he grabs the steering wheel and steers the car while Tutu continued with his prayer of thanksgiving to God!

It was quite a moment.
But it wasn't the most remarkable moment.

The most remarkable moment came two decades later, in a liberated South Africa.

Storey was at a conference when a tall gentleman “with a military bearing” introduced himself. He told Peter Storey that he had been the Military Intelligence adviser who had passed along the order that Storey and Tutu should be eliminated all those years ago.

The man said that he did not know why the order had not been carried out, but now he was glad that it had not been carried out.

And would Peter Storey forgive him?

On the surface, Peter Storey said he was having a physical reaction. His throat was tight, his heart was pounding. But below the surface...below the surface, Storey could see that something else was at work at that moment...or rather, Someone else was at work.

It was the risen Christ, revealing himself at that moment.

“Of course,” said Peter Storey.

“I forgive you.”²

The poet Christian Wiman once wrote:

“The task is not to ‘believe’ in a life beyond this one; the task is to perceive it.”³

Have you ever perceived it?

The new creation made known in Jesus Christ?

² Peter Storey, *Protest at Midnight: Ministry to a Nation Torn Apart*, Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2022.

³ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditation of a Modern Believer*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013.

In our Easter text, Mary is standing with Jesus, and she's in tears, and she thinks he's the gardener.

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!”

And in that moment, everything changed for Mary.

The risen Christ had appeared to her, and she knew that Death no longer had the final word. She received—however briefly—a glorious glimpse of God's new creation.

Have you ever seen it?

Have you ever seen the NEW GENESIS that John is describing in his Easter text today?

Heidi Neumark has seen it.

For many years, the Rev. Neumark served as pastor of a Lutheran Church in the South Bronx.

The leaders and officers of her congregation
included people struggling with addiction,
the unemployed, people experiencing homelessness.

During Holy Week one year at this church,
the congregation decided to reenact in a passion play
the whole sweep of Holy Week.

Jesus entered the city.

He was tried, condemned, and executed.

Then the women came to the tomb early in the morning,
and there were shouts of “*Christ is Risen!*”

True to the script, some then voiced disbelief—
but the play called for three members of the congregation
to stand up and give testimony, to bear witness.

They were to begin: “*I know that Christ is alive.*”

The first was Angie.
“*I know that Christ is alive*” she said, “*because he is alive in
me.*”

She told how she was abused by her father,
how she fell into despair and alcoholism,
and became HIV-positive.

But then she responded to the welcome of the church,
and she started attending worship,
and a Bible study,
and bit by bit she rose from the grave of her life.

THEN the two other members rose and told their stories—
“*I know that Christ is alive, because he is alive in me.*”

At that point the play was to move on—but it couldn’t.
Because then a fourth person rose—unscripted...
and then another person rose—unscripted...
saying “*I know that Christ is alive
...because he is alive in me!*”⁴

⁴ As told by Thomas G Long, in *Testimony: Talking Ourselves into Being Christian*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004.

So I was considering, on this Easter Sunday, doing the same thing.

I've never done that in an Easter sermon before.

Why not start with you?

I was thinking I'd invite some of you, to stand up right now, in the pews, and bear witness, and tell your story of how you have seen the risen Christ alive and at work in your life...

Wouldn't that be a wonderful way to end this Easter sermon??

I can already tell by the looks on your faces:

Ben—we're Presbyterian!

That's not going to work!

But you do know there are other ways it can work, right?

You see, the movement of John's Easter story is from weeping to witnessing. And you don't have to spontaneously stand up in your pew right now to be a witness.

- If you've ever shown up with food, at the door of a grieving friend...
- If you're a husband or a wife, who cares tenderly for your spouse with Alzheimer's, day after day, month after month...
- If you're a sister who refuses to give up on your sibling who is battling addiction...
- If you've ever forgiven someone who wounded you, or carried a neighbor's cross, no matter the cost to you...

You didn't do those things because you had nothing better to do that day. You did them **because Christ is alive...**
and he is alive in you!

Friends, the good news today is that the risen Jesus can show up in whomever he wants...above the surface, below the surface, or anywhere in between. He can show up in a former enemy in South Africa, or in any neighborhood right here in Greenville.

Heck, I've seen his face when we lived in Indiana.
 And I saw him again in Texas.

And then 5 years ago, we moved to South Carolina.
 And I saw the risen Christ...in you!
I mean, I can't shake this guy!
It's like there's no place the risen Christ won't go.

I hope you believe that.
 I hope you trust that there's no place Christ won't go—
 no despair he will not enter,
 no death he will not overcome with his love.

And when that reality sinks in for each of us, when it really gets below the surface that at the heart of this universe is Love...when that sinks in, don't be surprised if you find yourself awash in tears of joy.

That's another faithful way
 to respond to the good news we received today:

Christ is risen!
 (He is risen indeed!)
 Amen.