

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 4, 2021

Easter Tears

John 20:1-18

A few weeks ago, I contacted Chapman State Park, the traditional site for our Easter sunrise service. They told me that if we wanted to explore a possible service this year, we would first need to submit a COVID mitigation plan to be reviewed by the state health department for its approval before the park itself could sign off on our gathering. Rather than try to jump through all the bureaucratic hoops, I informed the park representative that we would just try again next year. So it goes when attempting to celebrate the resurrection on public property during a pandemic.

Without a sunrise service, we missed out on some darkness. By the time we got underway here in the church sanctuary at 11:00 AM today, the sun was high in the sky. There's now plenty of daylight, combined with our interior lights. Compare this to gathering in the pre-dawn hours on Easter, which has a different feel to it. For some of you, that feeling may be called sleep, which is what you're usually doing at 6:30 AM on a Sunday morning. But not so in the Gospels, including John. According to him, Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb to keep vigil, to be with Jesus in his death. She didn't wait until there was more daylight. "Early on the first day of the week, *while it was still dark*,... (v. 1). The good news of Easter begins in the dark. The darkness before dawn. The darkness of the tomb. The darkness of death.

During April 2020, the District of Columbia realized that the city's morgue didn't have the capacity to handle the surge of fatalities created by the coronavirus pandemic. So DC built a secret disaster morgue and assembled an army of volunteers to staff it, training them to be caretakers of the dead. Before the makeshift mortuary opened, officials gathered clergy from various religious traditions to bless it and consecrate it. These included a reverend, an Imam, and a rabbi, each of whom offered prayers, especially for those who would be working there. The rabbi who spoke stressed the righteousness of the mission, saying, "In Judaism, we believe the greatest kindness is to care for the dead." And one of the city's officials told each new set of workers, "There's not going to be a parade for you guys. You're not going to get discounts or big thank you signs. The work we do, we do in silence."¹

Perhaps this was the type of work that Mary Magdalene was doing on that first Easter morning. She was doing the invisible, silent work of kindness, caring for the dead Jesus. And now, as she comes back to his place of burial to continue her vigil, she's met by a troubling sight. As one commentator has observed, Mary has now experienced a double trauma. First, she was at the foot of the cross and watched Jesus die. And now she goes to the tomb and finds it empty.² To her this is evidence that someone has stolen Jesus' body. So Mary goes to Peter and the beloved disciple and reports her discovery. Note that this isn't an invitation for them to come join her at the tomb for a sunrise service. No, as far as she can tell, Jesus is still dead. He was victimized in life by those who crucified him, and now victimized in death by grave robbers.

And where does this leave Mary? In a state of confusion. She's in this space where grief, shock, disorientation, and bewilderment converge. After Peter and the other disciple come

to the tomb, see what Mary has seen, and then go back to their homes, Mary is left alone at the gravesite. There in the lingering darkness, she cries.

True, as readers, we know there's more to this story. We know what's about to unfold when Jesus appears. But for now, we need to let Mary be where she is. She needs this space where she can mourn. After all that has happened, and all that Mary thinks has happened, she needs room to weep. As one person has put it, "When the sorrowing sisters sat over against the door of God's sepulchre, did they see the two thousand years that have passed triumphing away? Did they see anything but this: "Our Christ is gone!"³ That's what Mary saw and felt. Christ is gone.

Several years ago, observers began noticing a trend in China called "crying bars." These are business establishments where people come in to cry and talk about their problems. The first cry bar, which opened in the city of Nanjing, sported only a sofa, a few tables, and lots of tissues. Customers could sit and cry for \$6 per hour. The bar's owner, Luo Jun, says he opened the place when clients of his last business said they "often wanted to cry but didn't know when or where it would be appropriate to do so."⁴

As I look down at our front pews, I see that boxes of tissue are still standard equipment here in our church sanctuary. That's because tears are permitted, and even encouraged, here in this worship space. These tears can be generated by a range of events and experiences. A song that touches you. A video that moves you. A sermon that stirs you. A testimony that inspires you. Particularly when we gather for a funeral, the boxes of tissue need to be within reach. "Then the disciples went back to their homes, but Mary stood outside the tomb crying" (vv. 10-11a).

The Christian life isn't a tear-free existence. Your own lives have been, and still are, filled with experiences and events, moments and memories, where you need time to weep and space to mourn. This past year in particular has brought us many experiences of loss. Loss of stability and routine. Loss of in-person, physical presence. Loss of jobs and income. Loss of opportunities. Loss of significant life events. Loss of health. And most of all the loss of life. Some of you have had family members, friends, neighbors, coworkers, or other individuals die from the coronavirus. The death toll in our nation and around the world has been staggering. And apart from COVID-19, we've experienced the death of loved ones here in our congregation. In so many ways, this past year has been a long season of grief.

The present feels like an in-between time. We're experiencing the hope that comes with the arrival of vaccines. But we're also experiencing the continuing suffering and loss. We're in a space where anticipation is mixed with sorrow. Joy and weeping coexist. This dynamic is similar to what the Christian faith has tried to capture in some of its traditions and practices leading up to Easter. In some parts of the church, Holy Saturday is observed as the time between the sorrow of Good Friday and the joy of Easter Sunday. In the early church, Holy Saturday was a time to stop and keep vigil. It was a time to fast and pray, to mourn the crucified, dead, and buried Jesus. These early believers knew that grief and mourning were an indispensable part of the journey to joy.

Writer Clarissa Moll has said, "The pandemic itself feels like one long Holy Saturday, where we live in the liminal space between death and the life we hope for on the other side."⁵ In today's text, Mary Magdalene is standing in an in-between space, even though she doesn't fully realize it. She's already mourning. And now her grief is compounded by the prospect that Jesus' body has been stolen. But the good news is that Jesus hasn't been taken away. No, he's as near as the stranger Mary encounters there in the garden. At first, she doesn't recognize our Lord. But soon the sound of his voice and the speaking of her name open her eyes, and she sees.

Here in John's telling of the resurrection, it takes some time to get from weeping to joy. The transition isn't easy or instantaneous. Notice that Jesus doesn't wait for Mary to finish her mourning before he shows up. Our Lord doesn't say, "Well, when she's done with her grieving, then I'll reveal myself to her." No, the risen Jesus comes to Mary in the midst of her grief. He discloses himself to Mary in the midst of her loss. Weeping becomes the space where Jesus appears, bringing comfort and gladness. The gladness of knowing that what God has started will be brought to completion. The gladness of knowing that resurrection power will eventually dispel all of our darkness, when Christ comes in glory, fully unveiled.

But for now, we still live in that interval where there's darkness. There's still brokenness, lostness, sin, sorrow, suffering, and death. Indeed, Christ is risen, and the light of God's coming kingdom has dawned. But we're still not in the full light of day. Our sight is still far from perfect. We still perceive Christ through our tears. As Paul says, "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12a). Until then, we rejoice and sing "Alleluia," but always with an awareness that the box of tissues is nearby, including here in the house of the living Lord.

Several years ago, pastor Rick Warren and his wife Kay went through a devastating loss when their son Matthew took his own life after years of battling mental illness and depression. About a year after the tragedy, Rick said,

I've often been asked, "How have you made it? How have you kept going in your pain?" And I've often replied, "The answer is Easter."

You see, the death and the burial and the resurrection of Jesus happened over three days. Friday was the day of suffering and pain and agony. Saturday was the day of doubt and confusion and misery. But *Easter*—that Sunday—was the day of hope and joy and victory.

And here's the fact of life: you will face these three days over and over and over in your lifetime. And when you do, you'll find yourself asking—as I did—three fundamental questions. Number one, "What do I do in my days of pain?" Two, "How do I get through my days of doubt and confusion?" Three, "How do I get to the days of joy and victory?"

The answer is Easter. *The answer ... is Easter.*⁶

On this Easter Sunday, there's plenty of light, but the darkness isn't completely gone. Nor are the tears. But Jesus lives, and is showing up in those places of mourning, turning weeping into joy. May he open your eyes to see him there. May you recognize his presence. May you join Mary Magdalene in declaring, "I have seen the Lord!" And may your own belief in him be evident in the ways that you yourself are present to others and with others in their spaces of sorrow and loss, for the sake of Christ.

¹ Luke Mullins, "Inside DC's Secret Covid Morgue." Washingtonian website. February 22, 2021. <https://www.washingtonian.com/2021/02/22/inside-dcs-secret-covid-morgue/> (March 31, 2021).

² Karoline Lewis, in Sermon Brainwave 778: Resurrection of Our Lord – April 4, 2021. Working Preacher website. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ar2fmc-CjeI> (March 31, 2021).

³ Mrs. Charles E. Cowman, in *Streams in the Desert. Christianity Today* (Vol. 41, No. 4).

⁴ "Crying Bars, A New Trend in China." Empirics Asia website. October 17, 2014. <https://empirics.asia/crying-bars-a-new-trend-in-china/> (March 31, 2021).

⁵ Clarissa Moll, "This Easter, the Weary World Rejoices. But First it Grieves." Christianity Today website. April 11, 2020. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/easter-coronavirus-weary-world-rejoices-but-first-grieves.html> (April 1, 2021).

⁶ From Lee Stroebel, *The Case for Hope* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015) 56-57.