

John 20:11-18

First, the Tears

Do you believe in Easter? I think it's a safe bet that Mary Magdalene didn't. She is at the tomb, crying, and saying to anyone who will listen, "I don't know where he is," "did you take him away?" She seems frantic to find the body of Jesus. I would think that is understandable- she must have developed a great devotion to Jesus, her teacher and healer. She keeps asking where he is, not trying to find a corpse; she may not yet understand resurrection from the dead, but Jesus is still real to her, still a presence in her life. To figure out Mary's thinking, maybe we need to go with her on this Sunday morning trip to the cemetery.

The author of this gospel presents it this way: it is Mary's second time to the tomb. The first ten verses of chapter 20 have Mary coming to the grave of Jesus before the sun was even up; she gets close and can see that the tomb is open. Now the other gospels tell us that a great stone was rolled over the mouth of the tomb, and that on Easter morning, this large stone was rolled away. If you have made any of our Good Friday services the past few years, you have heard the sound effect we use of a huge round stone rolling into place and sealing Jesus in the grave, and it sounds big and heavy and final. But here, the stone has been "taken away," like it was picked up out of its groove and tossed aside by a mighty

power. So, seeing that dark, gaping hole in the side of the hill, and the boulder thrown away, Mary runs to fetch a couple of Jesus' followers- Peter and the mysterious Beloved Disciple, and says to them, "They have taken away the Lord!" And they race back to see what is going on. The two male disciples enter the tomb and see funeral shroud of Jesus and the cloth that had been wrapped around his head, but of course, they see no sign of Jesus. And then the most befuddling thing of all- the strangest thing in the story, except for the miracle of Jesus coming back to life again, the two disciples- the two closest followers of Jesus- just go back home! (verse 10). But Mary stays. And so, she is the one who sees the heavenly visitors, and talks to them, and not the two disciples; she is the first to see the Risen Lord. If Peter and the other had shown a little more passion for Jesus, or been a bit more determined to seek him out, or even just more curious, they would have been there to see the Master. And you know, with all the notoriety of being first.

But it is Mary, who stands, weeping. As I read this scripture, I couldn't help but think of that famous verse in John 11, a verse all of us have memorized at one time in our lives, a verse we never forgot, verse 35, "Jesus wept." The shortest verse in the Bible. It happens, if you remember, at the tomb of Lazarus, and the people there see Jesus burst into tears and say to one another, "See how he loved

him.” I think we can look at the distraught weeping of Mary at the tomb of Jesus, and we can correctly surmise, “See how she loved him.” We may have doubts about others, but her tears and her despair prove her love. Later in chapter 21, Jesus will appear to the disciples along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, and will ask Peter three times, “Do you love me?” but he has no need to ask Mary; we can see it in her tears.

Now in preparing for this sermon, I have read some helpful comments by scholars, and some not so helpful comments. On the negative side of the ledger were a couple of writers who wanted to take the sentimental approach to Jesus showing himself to Mary, that because she was crying he felt sorry for her- a sympathy resurrection appearance. That seemed pretty silly to me. I think Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene in our scripture because she was the truest one of them all; perhaps for this gospel writer, she is the one who loved him most, and so, she was the one who wept, and who saw him first, the one commissioned to proclaim to the others that she had seen the Lord. So, if there is a lesson here for us, it is not to try to make God feel sorry for us, but to show our Lord that we are completely his. And he will bless us with special tasks- perhaps difficult ones at

times, but also with a close relationship with him, and like Mary, with a special vision of who he is, so that we may say, without boasting, "I have seen the Lord!"

Easter is our best day. We have all kinds of meaningful Sundays in church: Palm Sunday with the branches and the procession; Pentecost; the different pageants that churches present during Advent and at Christmas; perhaps homecoming or other celebrations. Our denomination has one I have never seen observed called "Rural Sunday," which is not, I think, a redneck holiday, but a remembrance of our church's heritage and its beginning on the American frontier. But Easter is the greatest day of all. It is the day Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, the day God displayed his endless power in an unimaginable way. And yet, in this gospel, Easter is so small and intimate and quiet. It is just this one forlorn woman crying, and Jesus meets her. Starting there, perhaps our passage can help us understand more fully the meaning of Easter.

Easter is the great day, but it begins with sorrow. Mary weeps, with despair and confusion. When Jesus comes she doesn't recognize him. How could she? She had seen him die that agonizing death on the cross, seen them carry him into this tomb. Maybe this gardener would know where Jesus had been moved.

The author has employed a very neat literary device here. Mary turns when Jesus arrives, but she doesn't know him. But then he speaks her name, and she turns again and recognizes him. This device is the key. She turns to face him- turns completely around- but the *second turning* is the shifting of her mind, or her acceptance of the impossible, the coming to faith, *so that she sees him*. With this second turning she begins to realize- and we do too- that everything has changed, Jesus has changed in some way, their relationship has changed. It requires the second look, he is more than we thought he was, different, and we can't know him until he shows himself to us. And he reveals himself in the most wonderful way. We may think of Resurrected Jesus, transfigured and glowing with a bright aura, an inner light, a happy smile on his face, the joy of overcoming his great suffering. But here in John, the Risen Lord looks like a common laborer. And the way he reveals himself is by speaking Mary's name. *He shows himself by showing us that he knows who we are*. When we hear that, truly we have heard and seen the Lord.

Now, don't misunderstand. That doesn't mean it's all about me. It is rather, that as the Lord calls our name and reveals himself, he reveals us to ourselves. He turns us around so that we may see who he really is and what we are meant to be;

at that point, we can only speak words of adoration, and fall down to worship this One who loves us so, and who knows us so well.

There may be times in our lives when we are lost and confused, without hope and in pain. Perhaps the best thing to do in those times is to come back to the tomb and wait for the Lord to return and show himself to us. To let him see our devotion to him and our need for him, and to hear him speak our name; and so, to see him anew, and to rejoice.

The crying comes first in our story, and then the recognition of the Lord and the joy of Easter. Jesus is alive, speaking names, opening eyes and hearts, calling others to live, calling to resurrection life. Resurrection life is a mature, growing faith, and we must not hold onto our old familiar conceptions of Jesus, just as Mary was forbidden to hold on to Jesus; it can't be the same, because he isn't the same: he has died and now has been raised, and that changes everything. Now truly, he calls us to believe, to look at him and understand, to re-learn what he is.

And he gives us a job to do. (Here's your call to discipleship!) Go and tell. And so, Mary goes, and we must go, and repeat these words of joy and

hopefulness, “I have seen the Lord!” words which speak of victory over death, and fulfillment of the human destiny; God’s plan for creation completed.

Or perhaps we merely need to answer the first question of the sermon: do you believe in Easter? And your reply must be more than simply an acknowledgement that something happened that day. Rather, do you believe in the spirit of Easter, is something happening this day? It is a personal question we may not want to answer, for Easter begins with tears; it may take us through sorrow but also may take us to where new life begins. What is your answer? Do you believe in the miracle of this day? It isn’t just Easter baskets and candy, but also a hard second look at ourselves and our beliefs. Easter means that we are changed, but also that we are brought out of our despair and into hope; that our weeping has found consolation and our broken hearts have been healed by the glory of his presence and the power of his resurrection life; that we are called by name and known by the One who died for us, and who was raised because true love defeats even death; that we are sent out to announce this glorious glad news, “I have seen the Lord!” And thus, perhaps not the end of tears, but the meaning of tears.

Let us hear his voice. Let us take the second look and see the Lord.