

Because I Have Seen the Lord

Why did Mary Magdalene weep outside the empty tomb?

We expect her to be joyful. But she probably felt every other emotion in the book as well. The events of the past three days were painful; then in an act of beginning her process of grief she came to visit the grave, only to find it empty. Joy, awe, and wonder, but probably equal measures of bewilderment and confusion too. Then, of course, we must add the adrenaline of racing to the disciples, then running back to see once again the empty tomb. All this was alive in Mary and coming to the surface at the same time. She was almost certainly, in modern parlance, a hot mess.

And now, in a moment of calm after thing one and thing two had seen the tomb and run back home, Mary Magdalene fell apart. I don't think these were the kind of restrained and dignified tears that are the stuff of Hollywood. I think this was what happens when grief and joy and adrenaline and belief and the reality of a world changing in an instant all come to the surface at once. I believe that Mary Magdalene was overcome by it all right there in the garden, and that this was the first ugly cry of the Christian era. And in many ways, it was the first moment of unguarded, unblemished truth that followed the resurrection itself.

So why did she cry? It's a bit of a silly question, because we all know that tears, whether they are of sadness or of joy, have a wonderful nonlinear quality about them. They don't come when our minds expect or desire. Our tears come on their own time, and when they do they often betray any narrative that we've constructed for ourselves. *Jesus was risen*, we might think, *so Mary should have been joyful*. Sure, that works on paper but real life, in the words of one of my favorite ministers, always turns out crumblier than that.

Tears come when we grieve, of course, and tears can come when we are filled with joy. We all know what it means to lose a friend. We also know what it means to be so touched by God that we cannot hold back tears. But there is another reason we cry: we weep when we are so open to where God is taking us that suddenly we see the world as we couldn't have imagined before. When we burst through the façade of our broken world to see the abundance of God's presence in our midst. When we touch the pain of another and realize that we had become adrift in an eddy of self-centeredness. When we finally break past those well-worn storylines of the world to which we'd resigned ourselves.

When we do, when the balloon is burst and revealed to be a pale shadow of the fullness that God promises, then, too, we cannot help but weep.

Mary weeps, perhaps, because the empty tomb was the most true thing she had ever seen. Was this different from how Peter and the Beloved Disciple experienced the empty tomb? I think it was. You see, all through the gospels the disciples, eager as they are to understand and follow Jesus, struggle with letting go *of their version* of what was unfolding. Part of that, I'm sure, was how they were conditioned to treat a new spiritual teacher, and part of that was the human need to fit something unfamiliar or even unknowable into the mold of what they already understood. The disciples are just like so many of us, and that seems to be their struggle, right up to Peter's denial of Jesus, right up to the day of Pentecost.

In fact, and this probably isn't fair, Peter and the Beloved Disciple seem to stay at the tomb just long enough to see it, but not long enough to sit with it. Then they scurry away like cub reporters running to file a story, while Mary stays.

Her tears, and her steadfastness in remaining there, speak of an incredible openness of spirit. Whatever God was saying, she was ready to say yes. Why did she weep? I think she wept because *her heart* had lead her into this new reality, and we all know that the heart can lead us to some messy places. But those places can also be the most true. Mary's eyes were opened because her heart was open, and so she saw Jesus, risen, standing before her.

I have seen the Lord, she told the others. It is Easter Sunday, and we all know the proper salutation: what will you say to your neighbors later today, and what will you say to your relatives when you call them? *Happy Easter!* That's a fine greeting, but it doesn't quite get at the heart of the day, does it? I hope you can say what Mary Magdalene said, perhaps when you greet one another at the Peace, perhaps after church. *I have seen the Lord*.

What we have in that phrase – I hope – is the very essence of why we are in community together. Why do we gather every week as the Church? *Because we have seen the Lord*. Why do we love our neighbor as ourselves? *Because we have seen the Lord*. Why do we love the poor and seek to be in fellowship with them? *Because we have seen the Lord*. Why do we honor the image of God in every human being? *Because we have seen the Lord*. Why do we courageously seek transformation, to become more loving, more compassionate, more open to the lively work of the Holy Spirit? *Because we have seen the Lord*. Why do we mourn on days that are barren, and why do we weep on days that are overflowing with joy? *Because we have seen the Lord*.

Mary had seen the Lord, and so have we. It's what brings us here but it is also what sends us forth, to carry the resurrected Christ beyond the church doors, into a world that is no stranger to tears. The resurrection changes our lives and shapes our hearts into vessels for Christ himself, that we might meet the suffering of the world with our own tears of joy.

We have seen the Lord, and through our tears, our love and our faithfulness, Jesus has molded our hearts into vessels for the love of God. The world is waiting for us to bring this gift to them, for us to bear that love and proclaim, The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia, Alleluia!

*The Rev. Bernard J. Owens, Easter Day, Year A, April 16, 2017, St. Andrew's
Episcopal Church, Greensboro, North Carolina*