

The Church of the Holy Cross
The Feast of the Resurrection
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“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look inside the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’” (John 20: 11-13a)

This Easter I am surprised that Mary Magdalene is asked to explain herself. First by some angels, and then by the Risen One himself: “Woman,” they ask, “why are you weeping?” Well, where to begin. Lost dream, lost cause, lost friend, lost Lord. Life turned upside down and inside out. Painful memory of Friday’s crucifixion. Wars and rumors of war. Disappointment in the disciples, disappointment in herself. Not knowing what’s next. Fear creeping in. And now someone’s taken the body. So Mary stands weeping outside the tomb.

It would be one thing if it were just the angels asking Mary—they haven’t lived this human life. But Jesus did and he should know better. Standing at the grave of his friend Lazarus, Jesus broke down and wept. Approaching the Old City of Jerusalem, the city of David and the footstool of Yahweh, with the crowds cheering him on, an overwhelming sadness suddenly overcomes Jesus and he weeps over the city. Plenty of religion, but blindness to the things that make for peace—what a loss.

“Woman,” they ask, “why are you weeping?” For God’s sake let the woman weep. If there’s any time to weep, it’s here at the tomb.

Now come on preacher—I didn’t come to hear your Good Friday sermon I came to hear your Easter sermon. Get on with the resurrection, the good stuff.

Well here it is, as best I can tell: Resurrection interrupts a perfectly good cry. Now I know I know, the angels don’t say to Mary stop your blubbering or quit it—they’re not angry or judgmental—they simply ask why the tears. In fact you get the sense that they might have added, “It’s okay to cry as long as you like; but just so you know, the cause of your grief has been removed.”

We have all come here on Easter Sunday to hear the good news, but the fact of the matter is that resurrection is a force that disrupts and interrupts the natural order of things.

“Why are you weeping?” these Easter messengers ask. The recent In Memoriam section of the Washington Post remembered a man who died five years ago. Under his smiling picture is a simple little poem written by his family: “We think of you in silence, no eyes can see us weep; but still within our aching hearts, your memory we keep.”

I am convinced we go to the tomb with Mary and weep because it is the right thing to do, because there is real loss and real grief, because it is the only thing to do. Disease that cuts life short, wars that dismember and damage; rhetoric that dehumanizes, poverty that makes desperate. Honest lament is the last vestige of our bodies telling us something has gone terribly awry in God’s world. Death and delusion appear to reign supreme. As one preacher recently put it, “Thirteen million children in this country go to bed hungry every night, and people say ‘We didn’t know that.’ The American people have more exposure to and knowledge of Britney Spears’ naval than they do the thirteen million who do not have anything to eat.” And so like Jesus over Jerusalem, we lament a world that seems blind and deaf to God’s purposes of life and health and joy.

The poet Jill Essbaum writes, “Easter is my season of defeat. Though all is green and death is done, I feel alone. As if the stone rolled off from the head of the tomb is lodged in the doorframe of my room, and everyone I’ve ever loved lives happily just past my able reach. And each time Jesus rises I’m reminded of this marble fact: they are not coming back.”

“Woman, why are you weeping?” This is the painful, joyful question of Easter. Something in me wishes Mary had shown some anger by the time Jesus asks—but she doesn’t. She doesn’t because Jesus calls her by name and she recognizes him: by God there he is before her eyes. Not a memory alive in her heart, not a mirage on the desert floor, not an encounter in a dream—but a risen body as real as yours or mine. A few days later he is on the beach cooking breakfast for the disciples. This you can imagine gives pause to even the heartiest lament. Oh yes, it could have been a rumor or perhaps Mary’s emotions that got the better of her. But even more unnatural than the resurrection itself is the assertion that some wishful thinking took a tiny band of utterly demoralized, beleaguered, disgraced, scattered disciples and transformed them into a mighty power that within a few years was shaking the foundation of the Roman Empire.

“Listen, I will tell you a mystery!”—the Apostle Paul shouts from the page in his letter to the Corinthian church. “We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.” That’s our resurrection: because Jesus was raised, so too shall we be raised. We want Paul to give us more details, but the most specific he gets is to say there is a physical body and a spiritual body; the physical body dies and is buried, the spiritual body is raised to new life.

“Woman, why are you weeping?” The presence of Jesus there in the garden three days after he died is enough to change Mary’s morning plans significantly. Here in bodily form is God’s refusal to accept the terms of death and destruction—for Jesus, for us, for anybody. The power that created you in your mother’s womb is the same power that can make you new.

Not just your good parts either. Not simply your confident smile but your hot tears; not just your good intentions but your unresolved anger; not simply your ability to love but your lingering prejudice; not just your brain and heart, but your vegetable body. God takes it and redeems it all. Jesus’ real human wounds still show in his risen body, and so will ours.

The mystery of Easter is not only that Jesus rises from death to new life, but that God wants your whole self right now. There is so much to weep about, but resurrection interrupts with a change of plan. “Go and tell” the good news, Jesus says over and over to Mary and the others. “Feed my lambs; tend my sheep; feed my sheep.” How many different ways can he say it?

In our self-consciousness we only want to offer the parts we approve of, but resurrection interrupts again because God wants it all. Don’t have to pass an exam, don’t have to make the grade; don’t have to make a first impression, don’t have to satisfy the boss. Here God: here are my tears that evil exists in me and in the world, here is my anger at my own powerlessness, my disappointment at my tepid response to your call. Here are my infrequent moments of desire for what is pure and good and right; and here, you might as well have it all, here is my deep and private longing for you whispered in the darkness—you unmediated by preachers and buildings and candles and dust-covered books but you face to face.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery: Resurrection interrupts because God can take it all. God can make it new.

Christ is risen! Happy Easter.