

## **JOHN 20.11-18: WHY ARE YOU CRYING?**

[Sunday morning 7 April 2013]

Easter has not come and gone. Easter is still with us.  
Christmas may have its 12 days, but Easter has its 50 days.  
Today is the second Sunday of Easter. In the church's liturgical calendar there are still five more Easter Sundays to come.

Indeed, in one sense every Sunday is Easter Day.  
For on every Sunday we celebrate that Jesus is risen from the dead.  
Muslims may go to the mosque on a Friday, Jews may go to the synagogue on a Saturday, but Christians come together on a Sunday to celebrate that it was on the first day of the week that Jesus rose from the dead.

Yes, celebrate is the word. For Easter spells victory.

*“Paint Christ not dead but risen!”* cried Tommaso Campanella to the Italian painters of his day. *“Paint Christ, with his foot set in scorn on the split rock with which they sought to hold him down! Paint him the Conqueror of death! Paint him the Lord of life! Paint him as what he is, the irresistible Victor who, tested to the uttermost, has proved himself in very deed mighty to save!”*

Easter belongs to the very heart of the Christian faith - and there at the heart of our faith is victory over evil, triumph over death, and joy, great joy, unspeakable joy, joy that has no end.

And yet on that first Easter Day there were tears – lots of tears.  
For John tells us that **“Mary (Magdalene) stood crying outside the tomb”** (20.11).  
Indeed, **“crying”** is scarcely strong enough to express the intensity of Mary's emotion - she was **“weeping”** [NRSV/Peterson], she was **“wailing”**.  
She was sobbing her heart out. She was inconsolable  
She just could not stop. It was gut-wrenching, heart-rending stuff.  
The pain – the misery – the anger. I can imagine her whole body shaking with tears.

No wonder the angels asked her, **“Woman, why are you crying?”** (20.13)  
Jesus too repeats the question: **“Woman why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?”** (20.15)  
I have little doubt that to Mary this was the most stupid question ever.  
And when Jesus asked the question the second time round, I guess that Mary felt like screaming: *‘Isn't it obvious? Isn't it painful enough? Can't you see?’*

### **1. TEARS OF OUTRAGE**

**“They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have put him”** (20.13).

The stone had been rolled away – the grave had been plundered – the body had been stolen. Mary was outraged. Evil men had been at work.  
Among Jews at that time robbing a tomb of a corpse was a terrible crime

It was an abuse of the dead. It was a shocking thing.

Do note that the thought of resurrection never entered her head.

Mary expected to find a dead body – but the body had gone.

It was terrible to see a person whom you loved being put to death on cross – but then for his body to be snatched – could they not leave this poor man?

Was there no place for respect? Did they have to humiliate him even more?

Who could have done such a dastardly thing?

No wonder Mary cried. This was just all too much.

Yes, in the first place her tears were tears of outrage

## 2. TEARS OF UNBELIEF

But they were also tears of unbelief

Poor Mary! If only she had reflected a little more deeply, she would have realised how ridiculous her outrage was.

What possible motive could Jesus' enemies have had for stealing the body?

Indeed, according to Matthew, the Jewish authorities got Pilate to post a guard at the tomb to prevent the body being taken - the last thing they wanted on their hands was an empty tomb. Who in their right senses would have wished to have taken the body? Not the friends of Jesus - nor the enemies of Jesus

If only she had looked a little more closely, she would have realised there was something unusual about the grave clothes.

For John tells us that when Peter came to the tomb, **“he saw the linen wrappings lying there and the cloth which had been round Jesus' head. It was not lying with the linen wrappings but was rolled up by itself”** (20.6b,7)

If grave-robbers had been at work, then almost certainly they would have taken the body, clothes and all - or if not, then they would have discarded the clothes and tossed them all into one heap. No robber is ever concerned to tidy up!

But the original Greek gives the impression that the clothes were lying like an empty chrysalis case from which the butterfly had emerged. The body had emerged from the grave clothes without disturbing them leaving them intact.

All the signs pointed to Jesus having been raised to life. Indeed, when John came to check out the tomb, we are told that **“he saw and believed”** (20.8).

He realised God had been at work. But not poor Mary.

Mary in her distress stood outside the tomb, **“weeping”**.

In weeping, Mary is a picture of all who believe only in a dead Jesus, who have failed to examine closely the resurrection of Jesus, and in so doing have missed out on the secret of joy.

For where there is no belief in the risen Jesus, there are always tears - tears of hopelessness, tears of bitterness, tears of deep distress. For as far as unbelievers are concerned, death is the end - it is final in every sense of the word.

But for those who believe in the risen Jesus, everything is different

There may still be tears, but they are not tears of hopelessness or of bitterness or of deep distress - they are tears of sadness which God can wipe away.

Listen to these stirring words of Rita Snowdon:

*“Shall I wear mourning for my soldier dead  
I - a believer? Give me red.  
Or give me purple for the King  
At whose high court my love is visiting.  
Dress me in green for growth, for Life made new.  
For skies his dear feet march, dress me in blue,  
In white for his white soul; robe me in gold  
For all the pride that his new rank shall hold.  
In earth’s dim gardens blooms no hue too bright  
To dress me for my love, who walks in light!”*

But Mary alas knew nothing of this.  
On that first Easter Day she wept tears of unbelief.

### 3. TEARS OF LOVE

Her tears of outrage and unbelief, however, were also tears of love.  
You can sense her love in the way in which she said to the angels: **“They have taken my Lord away”**. Note the use of the personal pronoun.  
It was because she loved him, that she was so upset that his body was gone

In the final love song contained in the Song of Songs the woman declares to her beloved: **“Love is as powerful as death; passion is as strong as death itself. It bursts into flame and burns like a raging fire. Water cannot put it out; no flood can drown it”** (8.6.7)  
Mary loved her Lord just as dearly.

Why was Jesus so special to Mary?

The other Gospels give the clue: for in Mark & Luke we learn that Mary Magdalene was the Mary from whom Jesus had driven out seven demons (Mk 16.9; Lk 8.2) Jesus had freed her from bondage to the demonic - he had brought to an end that hell-on-earth existence. Jesus had restored to her her own personality - Jesus had made her whole  
No wonder she loved him - no wonder she was devoted to him - no wonder she was in tears - she owed her all to him.

At this point I discover Mary to be an impressive figure  
For Mary presents not just a picture of unbelief - but also a picture of love and devotion.

In so doing she presents a challenge to us.

- How much do we really love Jesus?
- How devoted are we to Jesus?
- How grateful are we to Jesus?

OK Jesus may not have freed us from demon possession - but have we not been freed from the iron grip of sin and death?

Think of all that Jesus went through for you and for me. There on that cross he went through hell that you and I might go to heaven. How much do we love him in return?

It is all too easy for us to dismiss Mary as a weak, sentimental, emotional woman. But the truth is that we sometimes fall into the opposite error: we become hard, unfeeling, and cerebral people.

The OT commands us to love the Lord our God “**with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our strength, and with all our mind**” - but all too often we forget to love the Lord with all of our heart..

Mary wept. In the best of sense, she was in love with Jesus  
To what extent are you in love with your Saviour?

I am not pleading for a false emotionalism, but rather for the expression of genuine feeling. I agree with Billy Graham when he writes: “*Emotion cannot be cut out of life. No intelligent person would think of saying, ‘Let’s do away with all emotion’. Some critics are suspicious of any conversation that does not take place in a refrigerator. There are many dangers in false emotionalism, but that does not rule out true emotion and depth of feeling. Emotion may vary in religious experience. Some people are stoical and others are demonstrative, but the feeling will be there. There is going to be a tug at the heart*”

Don’t be afraid of those emotional tugs.

Allow your hearts as well as your minds to be moved by Jesus and his love.

#### 4. TEARS OF JOY

Mary loved her Lord. It was because of her love for him that she had been so outraged and upset – it was out of love for him that she was sobbing her heart out. But as she talked to the angels, she suddenly sensed somebody behind her. She “**turned round**” - and in turning she “**saw Jesus standing there; but she did not know that it was Jesus... She thought he was the gardener, so she said to him, ‘If you took him away, sir, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him**” (v14,15)

Interestingly, Mary was not the only person to suddenly wonder whether the gardener had removed the body. Tertullian, a bishop of Carthage around 200 AD, writes of how some Jews were scoffing at the idea that Jesus might have risen from the dead – they suggested that the gardener had taken the body of Jesus away in order that the many visitors to Jesus’ tomb should not spoil his salad plants! Needless to say, if the gardener had indeed removed the body, he could stopped all talk of resurrection by producing the body.

What is strange, however, is that Mary did not recognise Jesus. Why not?

- Perhaps her tears blinded her – clearly she was sobbing away - she was so absorbed in her grief that she couldn’t think of anyone else

- Furthermore, she didn't expect to see Jesus - she thought he was dead - the idea that this man could have been Jesus would never have occurred to her.

Here again is a further pointer to the truth of the resurrection

Sceptics sometimes suggest that the resurrection appearances were hallucinations - but most hallucinations are a form of wishful-thinking, reproducing in visionary form ideas which are already present.

By contrast the resurrection appearances were the very reverse: Mary didn't see the gardener near the tomb and think he was Jesus - she saw Jesus and thought he was the gardener!

To Mary, blinded by tears, Jesus said: "**Mary**". Or rather he would have said '**Miriam**', the Aramaic word for Mary.

All of a sudden Mary recognised Jesus. "**Rabboni**" she said. John tells us that the word **Rabboni** in Aramaic means "**Teacher**" - in fact, the term is often an expression of affection and can be translated "My dear teacher".

Oh the thrill, the wonder of it all - Jesus is alive!

Did her tears now vanish? I doubt it.

I guess that tears of joy now replaced those tears of sorrow.

Yes, there is such a phenomenon as tears of joy:

I shall never forget when our Susannah was born, Caroline was in floods of tears - she was so over the moon to have a baby girl.

Mary too was over the moon. In Psalm 30.5 we read: "**Tears may flow in the night, but joy comes in the morning**". This was certainly true for Mary - joy came to her that morning.

On this second Sunday after Easter, let me remind you that we have cause to celebrate. Jesus is alive – he is alive for evermore. What a difference that makes.

Yes, there are times when like Mary we experience tears – life can be tough.

But precisely because the tomb could not hold Jesus, we know that there is nothing in this world or indeed the world to come which can separate us from God's great love in him.

Let me close with the words of the Apostle Paul as he comes to end of 1 Cor 15, his great chapter on the resurrection: "**Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! So then, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm and steady**" (1 Cor 15.57,58).