

**GOSPEL READING: John 20: 1-18**

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2 So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." 3 Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. 4 The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7 and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8 Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9 for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10 Then the disciples returned to their homes. 11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12 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. 13 They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." 14 When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." 16 Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). 17 Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" 18 Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

**First Reading: Psalm 118:1-2,14-24**

1 O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his steadfast love endures forever! 2 Let Israel say, "His steadfast love endures forever." 14 The Lord is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation. 15 There are glad songs of victory in the tents of the righteous: "The right hand of the Lord does valiantly; 16 the right hand of the Lord is exalted; the right hand of the Lord does valiantly." 17 I shall not die, but I shall live, and recount the deeds of the Lord. 18 The Lord has punished me severely, but he did not give me over to death. 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness, that I may enter through them and give thanks to the Lord. 20 This is the gate of the Lord; the righteous shall enter through it. 21 I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. 22 The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. 23 This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. 24 This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

### ***“Easter Tears”***

It was early in the morning, very early in fact, while it was still dark, that Mary of Magdela went to the tomb. She went presumably to prepare the body of Jesus, or maybe to put out flowers in the garden, or likely to simply BE there, near HIM, away from her grief-filled, fear-laden, heavy home.<sup>1</sup> Yes, it was dark because the sun had not yet dawned, and it was dark because the world was just as violent, cruel and hopeless as it had been before she’s met him.

As Mary blinked back her tears and carefully placed each of her feet on the damp stone path so as to not misstep, she must have been thinking of the previous week. How horrible it had been. Not long after Jesus rode into Jerusalem, surrounded by “Hosannas”, things fell apart. Judas betrayed him. Jesus was arrested, and while he was at trial, Peter, Peter! denied him. And then, all those people who had earlier sung, “Hosanna”, got caught up in the bloodlust and the fear and the political power struggle. They started shouting, “crucify him” instead. And they did. Mary had seen Jesus, the One to whom she owed her life, suffer.... the crown of thorns, the lashing, the nails, the blood, the jeering, the piercing. She’d witnessed his last breath and she’d helped place his body hurriedly in a borrowed tomb. She’d seen his disciples desert him, running for their lives, and she’d heard their conversation since then, “*Jesus hadn’t been the Messiah*”, they’d said. But they’d been so sure, so full of hope and promise. “*Now what?*” Mary thought. It was as it was before. A very dark morning indeed.

And when Mary arrived at the tomb’s garden, it became even darker. The giant stone which had been put in front of the tomb had been rolled away. Mary was undone. Was it not enough that they had killed him, humiliated him? She assumed that Jesus’ body must have been stolen and discarded somewhere, alone and further disrespected. His body was all she had left! She returned to get Peter and John, who were still in hiding, and they came and went into the tomb. They affirmed that it was empty but ended up leaving. Mary, who refused to be anywhere else in her grief, remained standing outside the tomb, weeping. Of course, she wept. She cried enormous tears of unspeakable sadness, and loss.... darkness.

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon Kershner. Sermon: “*In the Dark*” <http://www.journalforpreachers.com/Easter%202015--%20Johnson%20Kershner.html> (accessed 3-29-18).

Have we not all been where Mary was, bereft because of some horrible loss, aching grief, feeling a huge hole where love and hope and trust and joy used to be? Have we not been hurt, betrayed and abandoned by others? Have we not been faced with our own sin, our lack of faith, the pain we've caused others, shame and guilt? And, have we not felt the weight of the world's sin, its cruelty and disregard for life, suffocating us, making us feel weak and fragile and powerless before it? I certainly have. I weep when I learn of a leader who bombs his own people with chemical weapons. I weep when I hear testimonies of people caught in the relentless grip of opioid addiction. I cry when more incidences of gun violence flash up on the screen, or when I hear of children whose parents must choose between paying the electric bill or buying food. I cry when I see marriages dissolving in my own circle of friends or illness snatch one from it. Yes, I do. We all do. We cannot help but cry Mary's tears in OUR darkness.

But in this story, this story which is so foundational to our faith, Mary's crying was interrupted. It was interrupted by a question, actually several questions, divine questions. The first one was asked by angels who were sitting in the tomb where Jesus' head and feet had been. Mary didn't see them as angels. Rev. Shannon Kershner explains that this was because Mary was still in a "Good Friday" world. There she couldn't feel comfort, only threat and suspicion. Rev Kershner says, "*You don't see angels in a Good Friday world; you only see strangers. Everyone you meet is not a potential friend, but a potential thief.*"<sup>2</sup> The angels asked her, "*Woman, why are you weeping?*" "*Why are you weeping?*"

Actually, it seems a ridiculous question, doesn't it? It was obvious why Mary was weeping. The Darkness had overwhelmed her. But, you know, the question WASN'T meant to have her provide the answer, "*They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him*". It was asked to instead move her gently from the Darkness into the Light. It begged a different answer. Now, Mary turned from the angels. But when she did, she was asked the question also by Jesus, although she supposed him to be a gardener. "*Why are you weeping?*" And before she could answer, he asked her a second one, "*Whom are you looking for?*"

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<sup>2</sup> Shannon Kershner quoting Anna Carter Florence, "Preaching the Text," [www.goodpreacher.com](http://www.goodpreacher.com).

Now, asking questions was central to Jesus' ministry. The Scripture records him having asked over 300 of them. When he asked the questions of Mary, he was trying to help her think more deeply. He was trying to prevent "her eyes from getting adjusted once again to the dark".<sup>3</sup> He was pushing her to look for someone more than her teacher and friend...to look, in faith, for JESUS, the One who is the Resurrection and the Life, the One who transforms the fragile, the weak, the lonely, the lost, the powerless, the One who disarms sin, undoes enmity, cruelty and malice, the One who forgives treachery and betrayal and takes away the power of shame and guilt.<sup>4</sup> Jesus wanted Mary to seek and find the Light that the Darkness cannot overcome.

*"Why are you weeping?" "Whom are you looking for?" he asked. But Mary still responded with, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." (pause) Then, Jesus said, "Mary!" He said her name, ever so gently, "Mary", and the Light then flooded her soul. The sun began to rise. The morning dawned. Mary recognized him. Her tears must have fallen all the more, running down her cheeks and onto the ground. But they were no longer tears of grief, hurt and fear. They were ones of pure joy, pure joy. They were what Sam Wells calls "Easter tears".<sup>5</sup> "Rabbouni," she said. "Rabbouni!"*

*When I was a little girl I really looked forward to the trips we took to my grandparent's home in Madrid, IA. It was a fun place. I especially looked forward to the wonderful meals we would be served. My grandmother was a terrific German cook. I know a lot of those. Yet I dreaded sitting down to eat. That's because we had to all first be still while Grandpa prayed. He said lengthy prayers before and after the meal. Even for adults, the prayers were so long. Sometimes he'd read from his German Bible before he'd pray, but that didn't help any. I couldn't understand a word of that either. And to make matters worse, Grandma would cry and cry and cry during them. I remember whispering to my mother once, "Why is grandma crying?" And my mother calmly responded with "Oh, don't worry. They're happy tears. Grandma always cries when she's with Jesus."*

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<sup>3</sup> Shannon Kershner. Sermon.

<sup>4</sup> Sam Wells. Sermon: "Why are you Crying?" <https://chapel.duke.edu/sites/default/files/April8WhyAreYouCrying.pdf> (accessed 3-28-18).

<sup>5</sup> Sam Wells. Sermon.

Not unexpectedly, Mary tried to embrace Jesus, to hold him, to cling to what used to be. But Jesus told her that he not only had yet to proceed to the Father for his full glorification, but that the close bond between them could not be resumed on the old terms.<sup>6</sup> Everything was different now. The RESURRECTION CHANGES EVERYTHING. Jesus told her to go and tell, to go and tell her brothers and sisters that HE WAS ALIVE, that he had risen from the dead, and that because of this, sin and even death had lost its sting. Evil would not, after all, have the last word. Life would! He wanted her to tell them this. He wanted them to know that their world of darkness too had been transformed. Their fear and hurt and grief had been displaced by joy and peace and hopefulness. Their world of guilt and loneliness and abandonment had been undone by forgiving mercy and grace. He wanted them to know that they could, THEY SHOULD cry too. (*slowly*) They should cry enormous Easter tears, and take those tears to the whole world to refresh everyone, to drench all who walk in darkness, to flood the entire creation, because what went wrong for humanity in the Garden of Eden had now been set right in another garden. Humanity was TRULY now made at one with God through our risen Lord and Savior.<sup>7</sup>

Friends, the questions I need to ask you this beautiful Easter day are: *Why are YOU crying? Whom do you YOU seek?* Are you crying because you are overcome by the Darkness in our world, in our lives? Are you feeling powerless, lonely, beat down by sin, by grief? Are you afraid that you are becoming adjusted to the dark, that nothing will ever be different? Or are you crying Easter tears because you've heard your name called by the Living Lord, and you are overwhelmed by glory, wonder, joy? Do you cry because the sun has dawned? Love has proven stronger than hate. Justice will flow down like the waters, and life has been shown to prevail over death. And **this truth, my friends, this truth of the future informs our present.** We can boldly now "take our tears to the world". Easter is flooded in happy tears. We have seen the Lord! Christ has risen. HE HAS RISEN INDEED x 3. HALLELUJAH! AMEN!

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<sup>6</sup> Gerard Sloyan, *John. Interpretation*, (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988), 223.

<sup>7</sup> Sam Wells. Sermon.

I am indebted to Sam Wells and Shannon Kershner for inspiring me with the core of this sermon. They have become my teachers.