
Tears at the Grave-Tears in Heaven

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

What did you bring to the grave this morning?

Beloved John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, brought his beauty and his youth to the grave. He was young and fast, and he outran Peter to the tomb. He peered into the open tomb; but he seemed, maybe, too young, maybe too innocent, to have the courage to go in.

Peter, the impulsive one, brought his "bull-in-a-china-shop" mentality to the grave. Even though he was outrun by John, Peter blasted right by John at the entrance; and it was impetuous Peter who entered the tomb first.

Mary, Mary Magdalene, brought her tears. While the officious men investigated, Mary stood apart in tears.

Today, each of us comes to this holy place in different ways. Some of us are John, young and beautiful. Maybe we run fast everywhere, from place to place, from fad to fad. We get there first, whatever that means.

Some of us are Peter, ahh!, blessed Peter, the impulsive Peter. We are ready to walk on water one minute, and we are sinking fast the next. We promise our allegiance one day, and the next day we deny our love three times, back to back to back.

Today, I want to speak to those of us who are like Mary, Mary Magdalene. Mary Magdalene brings tears to the grave on Easter morning. I know it's Easter. And many of us are dressed in our finest clothes and smiles. We want to laugh, don't worry, and be happy.

But some of us have been crying this day, already, and this past week, and this past year. Just last Monday, at the beginning of Holy Week, many of us mourned a tragic death in the Cathedral community. One of our newest nursery workers, twenty years old, was struck by a car and killed; her family and our parish community began this past week in tears.

Some of us across Atlanta have just learned that our school is closing. Others of us are going through painful separation, and even divorce. During the past year, this Cathedral parish buried several children; we also lost some hopes, some anticipated futures. Others of us have suffered illnesses, cancers, and we have lost parts of our bodies. Those losses, those memories, provoke tears in us.

And, of course, some of our tears come from this annual explosion of pollen everywhere! Hickory and oak, grasses and lilies, pine and poplar; we are crying from it. Easter is a time for tears! I propose that we make them Holy Tears!

Holy tears are not at all restricted to women. I remember one of the first parishioners I ever visited, a tough old man, but who adored both his fine stereo system, and Beethoven. When Beethoven played, he would immediately begin apologizing for his tears. But those tears were a gift for me.

Last week, as I was studying the famous movie actor, Clint Eastwood, and the morality of his movies, I ran across this question: Do any of the tough characters Clint Eastwood has played, ever cry? Well, yes, they do. The *Outlaw Josie Wales*. And standing over the *Million Dollar Baby*, after turning off the respirator, Clint Eastwood cries. And, at the end of the movie, *Gran Torino*, when Walt Kowalski's next door immigrant friend has been savagely beaten, there is a tear, a tear, in Clint Eastwood's eye. That tear will lead to us his laying down his life for the people he loves, and then a resurrection of them.

In the Bible, almost every single one of the main characters is recorded to have cried. Abraham, Hannah, Esau, Jeremiah, David, Paul, Peter. Even Jesus. The shortest verse in the Bible says, simply, "Jesus wept."

Where was Jesus when he was crying? He was going to a grave. He was mourning the death of his friend, Lazarus, at the tomb. Jesus wept.

So, Jesus, too, knows what it is like to bring tears to the grave. Mary Magdalene brings them that first Easter morning. After Peter and John leave, the only person remaining with Mary seems to be an anonymous gardener, at least so he seems to Mary. She does not recognize that the gardener is actually Jesus himself.

Look again at the story. When does Mary recognize that it is actually Jesus? Her recognition occurs when Jesus looks at her and says her name. "Mary." When she hears her name spoken, in that deep and knowing and holy way, she knows that it can only be Jesus. When she is named, the Resurrection has happened. She is in heaven.

All the greats know how to cry. It happened to one the great guitar players of our generation, Eric Clapton, when he suffered surely one of the great tragedies of any human being, the loss of one's child. His son, his only son actually, at four years old, fell out of the window of a high-rise building and died. It did not happen at Clapton's house; it was a tragic accident. Eric Clapton's immense grief became expressed in his song, called, "Tears in Heaven."

"Would you know my name?" he asked, "Would you feel the same, if I saw you in heaven?" "Would you know my name in heaven?" In the song, Clapton concluded that there are no tears in heaven, but I believe he may be wrong about that.

Are there tears in heaven? Of course there are. Tears might actually be our entry into heaven.

What is heaven, if not the presence of God? What is heaven, if not the presence of Someone who has died, and yet who lives? What is heaven, if not the voice of Jesus Christ, resurrected, truthfully speaking our name?

Maybe it was the soul of Mary Magdalene, her subconscious, asking the same question, "Would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven?" And Jesus said to the crying woman, "Mary." Immediately, she was in a new place; she was in the kingdom of heaven. She was with Jesus.

So it is that the first person to recognize the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our Lord, was crying. That person was Mary Magdalene. In England, her "last name" so to speak, is not pronounced "Magdalene." It is pronounced "maudlin," which has come to mean tears, maybe even excessive tears.

In the seventh century, A.D., St. John Climacus, that is, St. John of the Ladder, compared tears to baptism. Tears are so soul-cleansing, he said, that they are like a second baptism. Someone said, "We wash the body with soap; we wash our souls with tears."

At Easter, then, today, as we renew our first baptismal vows, it is good also to remember our tears, and all the ways that our souls are cleansed with the tears of a second baptism.

The Resurrection does not avoid tears. It seeks them out. The people who cry are the people who can see Jesus. And don't be afraid of tears. Tears are where Jesus shows up. Bring your tears to the grave this morning, and you will find resurrection.

Yes, if we want proof of the resurrection, we will not find it any history or science book. If we want evidence of new life in Jesus, look for people who have cried. Look for people who are singing to their children in heaven. Look for Walt Kowalski, a tough man with a tear in his eye who lays down his life for the people he loves.

Psalm 126:5 says that "Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy." If you have sown with tears, you deserve to sing with joy today. "Welcome happy morning, age to age shall say." Tears are sown, and we are reaping joy.

Tears are not just signs of sadness, or signs of sorrow. Tears are signs of life. We are alive when we cry, alive to the Resurrection, alive to the reality of seeing Jesus Christ our Lord.

Alleluia. Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen, indeed! Alleluia.

AMEN.

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