

Introduction

Behind this day's celebratory designation on the calendar, hidden fears are lurking. What if this stay-at-home order extends for months into May and June? What if the economy remains shut down into the summer and my company is forced to lay off more people? What if we too hastily judge that the curve is flattening and a second wave of infection comes with vengeance? What if the infection and death rates continue to soar with no end in sight? Fears leads to tears. The tears of seniors who were given 24 hours to pack up and were never able to participate in graduation ceremonies or say goodbye to their friends. The tears of not knowing how you'll provide for your family. The tears of medical workers who describe to reporters the worst crisis they have faced in their careers. The tears of those who have seen loved ones pass away in overflowing hospitals. The tears of those who remember other friends and family who have died years ago. This is an emotional time for us all, and on Easter morning we need to turn to a page in John's Gospel where the emotion flows right off the page. As you join Mary Magdalene in going to Jesus' tomb,

Easter Wipes Your Tears Away!

Before the crack of dawn, it's time to get up. "I've barely slept. I've had nightmares. Last Friday emblazoned horrific scenes of my dear rabbi in ways I have never seen him before. I heard the shrieks from the scourging. I saw the grimaces from the nails. I stood there as he bid a final farewell to his mother. I was shocked to hear the jokes descend into derision and mockery. I felt the shaking ground tear the rocks apart in the midst of darkness. I couldn't bear to lift up my head as I watched from a distance, knowing my life would never be the same. I watched Joseph of Arimathea battle against the setting sun to do the best he could when he threw together a proper Jewish burial – God bless his heart – filled with a clean linen cloth, myrrh, aloe, spices, a new tomb, and a big stone in front. This is my rabbi whose needs I've cared for these past three years. Now he's been ripped out of my life! These are the things only women can truly understand. Where were his disciples? Why were we women the only ones there to take it all in! I got to do something!

"As the sunlight creeps over the horizon, my worst nightmares start to come back. The stone has been removed! What now?! Have grave robbers come in the middle of the night?! Have they stolen away all the expensive linen and spices?! Have they desecrated the tomb?! Have they left my loved one's final resting place in shambles?! Have they dumped his body in a garbage pit – I don't even want to picture this – to decompose along with other executed criminals in a mass grave?! That's no way to treat my dear Lord's body! How guilty I feel! I was the one who should've been looking out for him. I was the one who should've protected him. I was the one who should've ensured a decent burial. This is my final act of devotion and worship for my dear teacher.

"As Peter and John race off to the tomb ahead of me, my worst nightmares start to overwhelm me. Slowly I feel it coming – the lump gets lodged in my throat; my lips start to quiver; my eyes feel the first trickle of a tear. Then the flood come. I can't help wailing. I don't care how loud and obnoxious I am. I'm all alone in my solitude, so no one can hear how loud I'm echoing throughout this garden. I need to let it all out. My memory's scared! My loved one's dead! My teacher's gone! My dear Lord's body lost! My mind's racing at what might

happen next! Well, I mind as well face my fears and look in. *All I want to see is the dead body of my friend.* See, it's not there! I told you! This just proves that my worst nightmares are happening in front of my eyes." ... "**Woman, why are you crying?**" "Who are you?" "We are angels sent from God himself to announce a glorious event." "I don't care! Where is my Lord? **They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him.** Enough of this, I'm leaving. I need to turn away from this place and find him! Whoa, you almost startled me standing behind me like that. Who are you? You must be the gardener." "**Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?**" "I'm crying because my Rabbi just died and I can't find his body! Maybe there was a big mixup. Maybe the garden owner didn't know who this criminal was who was hastily thrown into a tomb two nights ago. I plead with you, it was no mistake! Did you just take him to a different tomb? Please, I beg you, don't tell me you just threw the body away. He is the one we all thought was the Messiah, the one promised of old. I'm telling you, he is no ordinary man. I'm telling you, he was no criminal. He was our Savior, the one who ushered in the kingdom of God and taught with authority. He was the Lord of all, the very Son of God who came to rectify our broken world. He was a compassionate man who healed the sick and raised the dead. He is my Lord, and I want nothing more than to find his body and ensure he gets a proper burial! *Just show me his dead body,* and I will be forever grateful! I'm desperate. **Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.**" ... "**Mary.**" ... "How do you know me? Do I know you? I must, if you know my name. Could it be? Could it really be? Could it really be him? Could it be my Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep and call them by name? Could it be my Lord, my Rabbi, my Teacher? Yes, it is! **Rabboni!**"

"Mary, all you desperately wanted was to find my dead body so you could give me a proper burial. But you were aiming far too low. You did not need to look for my dead body; you needed to look for me. And you've found me. I am here to dry your tears. I am here to assure you that death has no power over me. I am here to transform that scaring event two days ago into a beautiful event that proves how much I wanted to wash away your sins and love you to the end. I am here to wipe away your tears, calm your soul, give you peace, and eradicate your nightmares. So you can stop clinging to my feet. You don't have to fear that this is another nightmare where I will appear to you and then forever leave. **Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.** As I promised, I will ascend to my Father, but not quite yet. I will still be here to reassure you that it is truly I who have risen. But I still have work for you to do. You cannot stay here. I want you to reassure others just as I have reassured you. **Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'**" "Yes, Rabboni, I will go. You have wiped my tears away and calmed, consoled, and cared for me. I can't help but spread the news. I came looking for a dead body, but now **I have seen the Lord!**"

Before the crack of dawn, it's time to get up. I've barely slept. I've had nightmares. I can't get my mind off thinking of my one loved one who's passed away. I miss them so much, and I just need to go to their final resting place. As the sunlight creeps over the horizon, its rays streak through the misty air, tall trees, and spring flowers. No one's here. Just me. I can just cry, and no one will know. "I just want you to know how much I miss you. I'm sorry I didn't do more for you while you were living. I just wish I could honor you one last time. I just wish I could talk with you again." We've seen people muttering words at the graveside of those they love, and many of us have done it ourselves. Yet the sad irony is palpable. They're not there anymore. They are dead. You can't talk to them anymore.

So when was the last time you cried? Was it when you regretted a major life decision and knew you couldn't go back and undo it? Was it when you messed up a close relationship and knew it was all your fault? Was it when you thought about your own death? Now I need to emphasize something very clearly. It's not a sin to cry. It's not a sin to wail loudly. It's not a sin to grieve over death. It is a sin to be so consumed in our tears that the tears blind us to *even the possibility* that Jesus might have power over death. The devil wants nothing more than to use the tears to drive a wedge between you and your Lord. How can this day be so joyful when there are so many tears in the world? How can Jesus be your resurrected Lord when you haven't seen him with your own eyes? How can you honestly think a dead body was raised when that just can't happen? So like Mary Magdalene, we cry out, "All I want is closure! All I want is to bury my loved ones in peace! All I want is to go back to how it was before!" Why did Jesus appear to Mary first? She did not enjoy an influential position as one of Jesus' chosen disciples. She would not go on to be a great missionary or pillar in the early church. She did not enjoy a very respected position as a woman in the first century Roman world. Yet she needed him the most.

Jesus knows you need him the most on a morning like this. So just turn around. Someone needs to reveal himself to you. Someone needs to call out to you. "Just hear me call you by name. I am your Good Shepherd who knows you by name. I know exactly who are mine. I know you want to cry when you know you won't walk across the stage to receive your diploma and say goodbye to your friends. I know you want to cry when you think of losing your job. I know you want to cry when you think of getting sick and going to the emergency room. I know you want to cry when you think about hospitals choosing who gets ventilators and who doesn't. I know you want to cry thinking about if you would contract the novel virus unawares at the grocery store and unwittingly infect your family. I know you want to cry thinking about dying yourself. I know you want to cry thinking about your loved ones who have died. I am here to wipe away all your tears. I am here to assure you that the coronavirus does not need to define your life. I am here to assure you that I have conquered death and I will bring you to my Father just as surely as I am going there."

"I am here to embrace you and comfort you as you think of your sick and deceased loved ones. I have power over it all. In the meantime, I have something for you to do. Stop holding on to this day, this hour, this moment, and never wanting it to go. I will not leave you. Tell your babies they need not fear going to bed anymore. Tell your friends you are not scared of the coronavirus anymore. Tell your coworkers you are not worried about job security anymore. Tell yourself that you do not need to cry anymore, because Easter wipes your tears away."

Conclusion

I don't have to tell you why Easter matters this year. Our worst nightmares are coming true. The glorious Easter music is replaced with eerie silence around the home. The sumptuous Easter breakfast is replaced with simple cereal, toast, and coffee. Decades of celebrating Easter in a packed church with a packed parking lot is replaced with a solitary computer and a parked car in the garage. We are currently stuck at home; a global pandemic is killing people around the world. We have plenty of reason to be sad and focus on the bad, plenty of reason to be fearful and be tearful. Turn away from it all, because Jesus is standing behind you. He turns sadness into gladness, badness into goodness, fear into confidence, and tears into joy. Learn what Mary learned that first Easter morning. Easter takes your tears away! Amen.