

“May God ‘Easter’ In Us”

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(1 Corinthians 15:1-11, John 20:1-18)
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Easter comes decked-out in the brightest rainbow colors, playing brass and winds, and singing Hallelujahs, but if we look closer Easter is streaked with tears and mourning sounds. We thought we were finished with the tears on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. But even at Easter a sobering question: “Woman, why are you weeping?” There are always people who think we should just get over grief, but we can’t merely wipe away the tracks of our tears. **So we focus on a weeping woman in the midst of our Easter lilies.**

The drama opens with a dark stage populated by a weeping Mary of Magdala. She may be the most maligned woman in Christian history. Preachers and popes have falsely, and perhaps maliciously, identified Mary as the woman sinner anointing the feet of Jesus and as the woman caught in adultery. Ancient and modern interpreters have confused Mary with an array of other characters and misfits, including *The Last Temptation of Christ* and *The DaVinci Code*. In A.D. 591, Pope Gregory I preached a sermon that identified Mary Magdalene as Mary of Bethany and “the woman who was a sinner.” The slander attached to Mary may have been associated with the church’s excluding women from holy orders. Even a sympathetic interpreter like John Arnold, in what must be a fit of male chauvinism suggests that Mary had a “hysterical” personality – with rapid swings of moods and a clinging nature. But here’s what we know from the New Testament evidence: Luke says, “Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out.” She was a follower of Jesus; she was present at the crucifixion and now she stands on the semi-dark Easter stage softly weeping.

The grief dogging Mary started back on Friday when Jesus was brutally crucified. The weekend from hell, we would say. Once Mary started crying, she didn’t think she’d ever be able to stop. If you witness a death, you can’t get it out of your mind. Johnelle served on the Robert Lee Willie jury – the movie *Dead Man Walking* was based on that trial. Some time later she asked Judge Buddy Crain, “When does it go away?” Perhaps only a witness to the death of Jesus is qualified to be the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

It’s Easter Sunday, yet Mary remains under the spell of Death. It is like being hypnotized. Grief speaks in mindless **robotic redundancy**. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” Mary talks with angels and still she doesn’t really see. “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” To angels, to gardeners, to anyone she meets, Mary can only repeat the refrain that reveals her blindness to resurrection.

Hypnosis requires a trigger to bring someone out from under its influence. **“Mary!”** Her name breaks the spell. Jesus spent his ministry breaking the spells of disease and death. “Rise and walk!” “Your sins are forgiven.” “Mary” – the first name the-raised-from-the-dead savior utters upon awakening. Dignity this gives to Mary, status and standing in the church this gives to Mary. A word about Mary’s standing in the church. Hippolytus in the third century and Pope Gregory the I in the 6th century damaged Mary’s reputation; the latter at the time the church no longer allowed women to be ordained as deaconesses. In contrast, the Eastern Orthodox Church claims Mary as the Apostle to the Apostles. God calls Mary to announce the good news. **“Announce”** (apagello: to proclaim, to bring tidings; messenger;

angel; evangelist) is a word for preaching and it is Mary's ordination to the gospel ministry. "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news." "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." Christmas culminates in Easter. Mary – angel, evangelist, preacher.

And so we greet the other primal emotion of Easter: Great joy! Splash on the bright colors: deep yellow, pink and purple, red and green. Now the florists and the flutists and the fashion designers can lead the Easter parade. And get that kettle drummer from *Catcher in the Rye*. And those leaping lunatics from Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation." And Julie Andrews from *The Sound of Music*. Most of all, get me a church full of Christians singing with unrestrained joy. As Gerard Manley Hopkins puts it, "May God easter in us" the primal joy of aliveness. Easter is the most joyful day in the world. Death loses. Life wins (I Cor. 15:3-4). Joy breaks out into a particular kind of pure laughter. Not the laughter of sarcasm, or making fun of others, or mocking and deriding. Not the death-rattling fake laughter of the world that we use to hide how hurt we are, how insecure we are, and how defensive we are. We seem to laugh less as we grow older. Well, Easter comes to restore the laugh so that as we age we laugh more.

When God "easters" in us, we experience transforming laughter. Laughing is participating in God's joy of creation. This is more than laughing at jokes, although that is fun. Did you hear the one about the woman visiting a church one Sunday and asking the usher to seat her on the first row? The usher said, "Oh, you don't want to sit there, we have a really boring guest preacher today." "Do you know who I am?" The usher said, "No." "I'm the preacher's mother." The usher said, "Do you know who I am?" "No." "Good," said the usher. But Easter laughter is about joy not jokes. Falling down on the floor, infectious, irresistible laughter at the sheer joy of taking part in what God is doing – a laughter that includes everyone, excludes no one. A laughter that doesn't humiliate or denigrate. There's a Cajun restaurant in Breaux Bridge, Louisiana. Not only are families having red beans and rice with sausage and boiled crawfish, but Zydeco music is playing and grand-pawpaws are dancing with their granddaughters. Easter's like the gathering at Mulate's except that we gather to dance, eat, and drink with the living Lord at a table for everyone.

And besides, Easter hints burst forth like spring blossoms in the gospels. There's the laughter of the tenth leper who turned back to thank God for his healing. Luther's definition of worship: "The tenth leper turning back." The laughter of Lazarus, striding out of the grave, unwinding grave clothes as if peeling an orange. The laughter at the wedding in Cana. When the wine gave out, the host was mortified at his embarrassing social blunder. Then the robust laughter from the host at the sight of six jars of water turned into fine wine. So raise a glass of wine over Easter dinner and celebrate the resurrection. When Jesus said, "Come down, Zacchaeus for I'm going to your house today", Zacchaeus nearly fell out of the tree laughing so hard. Giddy Zacchaeus announces, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I restore it fourfold." Now, that's a stimulus plan for the poor and a punishment for Bernard Madoff.

May God easter in us the great joy of life and laughter. The thought of it makes Scripture tumble from my mouth like Mexican jumping beans: "Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh" (Lk 6:21b). "Weeping may endure for a night; but joy comes in the morning" (Ps 30:5). "Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves" (Ps 126:5-6). "The voice of rejoicing and salvation is in the tents of the righteous" (Ps 118:15).

Here comes Easter laughing in death's face. See the sun-drenched colors with the dried tears and the laughter etched on the face of Mary Magdala. But more see a risen Lord! He wipes every tear from our eyes. God has eastered in us and God's home is among us. Mary announces, "I have seen the resurrected Lord." May God easter in us the life and the laughter.