

The Turning of the Tears

John 20: 1a, 11-18

**First Presbyterian Church
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Hers is the most poignant of all the resurrection stories. Mary had come to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus with spices which would preserve it. She hoped to complete the burial rites they had begun Friday evening shortly before the Sabbath had interrupted them. And she wanted the chance to hold him one more time. After the horror of Friday, she wanted to see him at peace now. Mary loved Jesus no less after his dying, and in the weird lengthening of the hours that often follows a death, it was only the thought of seeing him again which got her through.

And so the sight which greeted her was all the more bewildering. The body was gone. Oh, was it not enough to mock him, and then beat him, and finally kill him? Now they had stolen his body as well. Jesus was not allowed to be at rest, and Mary was not allowed the certainty of her grief. Her weeping was all the more; her good grieving had been suspended. For it found no location, no body on which to alight. This tragedy never ended. They were still doing things to him.

Then a strange man inside the cave asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Mary answered, "Because they have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him." She spoke of him as if his dead body were her Jesus, so diminished were her expectations at the tomb. The body, the body would be enough for her, if only they had not taken it.

Then Mary turned around and saw Jesus. She did not recognize him. Mary supposed him to be the gardener. Perhaps he would know where the body had been taken. Grief found its voice in insistence, "Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me, and I will go and get him." Do not deny me any longer; you don't even need to help me; just show the way and I will get him.

And then the turning of the tears.

Jesus spoke to her one word, "Mary."

The steady rain of her tears had blocked all sight of the world beyond the windows of her eyes. Now the rains ceased and the waters parted. "Mary!"

She saw that it was her Lord. "Rabboni! My teacher!" She fell at his feet and held onto him hard. He was alive. How could it be? His voice still sounded in her mind, the voice like no other. "Mary." She knew. Beyond hope. Beyond belief. And the rains fell again, though now she was weeping for joy. The turning of the tears.

Today we declare the resurrection. Victory over death and sin has been won. We speak light into the darkness; we sing joy into despairing hearts. And yet, tugging on our joy is the pain that all of this resurrection does not seem very apparent in the world yet. Our celebration is tainted with doubt. How does the power of resurrection work in a world of Covid 19, terrorism, and aggressive wars? Where people still die, relationships still end too soon, anger and violence still erupt? How does Jesus turn our tears in the midst of a world like this?

One of the great authors Louisiana can at least lay a partial claim to is Robert Penn Warren. He taught at LSU for several years and his most famous book, *All the Kings Men*, was set here. What most people don't know is that Warren was our nation's first poet laureate. In his later years, his poems grew even more poignant and powerful. They often contained stories within them. At the beginning of one poem, a man and a woman are swimming in the Pacific Ocean at dusk. I don't know if you've done much ocean swimming, but whenever I've been in water that's really deep, I get the creeps. There are things swimming down there; stuff is going on beneath me that I can't see. Well, as the two swim, stars begin to appear in the gloaming sky above them. Taking their strokes, they look up at the starlight. Seeing the sky far above them, they feel drawn towards eternity, even as they feel underneath them the depths of the ocean tugging them downward. This is the picture Warren paints: eternity pulling from above, oblivion from below, and the man and the woman swimming in between.

That couple is every one of us, swimming through our brief days in the world. Eternity is set in our hearts; we look toward the stars; we reach toward God. But perilous waters could wash over us and deep waters could drag us down at any moment. As they swim side by side, Warren writes that "...they feel the sea's long swell\And the darkling drag of nameless depth below."¹ *The darkling drag of nameless depth below*. Perhaps not all those depths are nameless. I think sometimes that I have heard their names spoken in tears.

There is the *dark drag of fear* which pulls in a long slow swell beneath us. Will everything be all right? Will I be able to do what I need to do before age or

illness stops me? Will I really end up after all these years of work with no money, dependent on others? What will the world be like for my children? We get seized with fears that rise up from the depths. And those fears may well be more than just worry. Life is dangerous. The world is unfriendly. We are frail. We may not be able to protect that which we love. We may not succeed at the tasks to which we are called. The whole thing at any moment really could collapse in a heap at our feet. The truth is enough to make you cry for the frustration and fear.

But swimming through the seas, I have also had glimpses of starlight above. I have seen people show courage in the face of insurmountable obstacles. I have seen the tenacious will of love. Even more, I have felt the peace which passes understanding. Deeper than the dark depths of our worst fears, this peace assures us that everything is all right. Sometimes, just when we feel completely helpless and out of control, there comes the encouragement that we are loved. We are kept and held. Beyond hope, beyond the worst of circumstances, facing a terrible future, people have known with certainty that God exists and is holding all things together for good. He knows you personally and he calls you by name, just as Jesus said, "Mary!"

Everything in the short term might still turn out terribly. Life remains perilous. But there are some who have known that in spite of everything, right now, it is all right. Jesus has risen from the dead. The results of the game are already in: when the last buzzer sounds, we win. Life will conquer death; righteousness will one day replace injustice; joy will conquer despair. From a source unknown to us before comes the courage of resurrection. The turning of the tears of fear.

And there is *the dark drag of guilt*. Permeating all our joys can be an awful sense of unworthiness. Many of us wait anxiously for the moment when we will be found out and exposed for all we are, and are not. Secret regrets may wake us at night, no matter how hard we try never to look back during waking hours. Rising up from the depths like some huge creature from the ocean, comes the awareness of sin that grabs us and clamps down upon us.

And for some of us, our lives are indeed a botched job. The future is not bright. The past is littered with failed relationships, jettisoned careers, self-delusions, intuitions unheeded. We are astonished at ourselves. Our own helplessness amazes us. Our indolence sickens us. The dark drag of guilt wants to pull us down, down, into the depths.

The resurrection is no magic wand. Suddenly deciding you believe in the resurrection of Jesus is not going to clear up every consequence. Our messes don't just disappear; it takes steady work to clean them up.

Still, at the emptiest, scariest moment of realizing our guilt, there can come a turning. I have seen broken lives put together again. And there have been times when the new patched up life was much better than the old. Broken relationships, no matter whose fault, can in time be graced with new love and trust. Addictions have been conquered. Sentences get served and new beginnings occur. People *do* stop running away from their lives and start living truthfully. We change.

The resurrection of Jesus can make us new creations in Christ. Memories can be healed. Guilt, real guilt, can be forgiven by the one who took sin upon himself, hugged it unto death, and came out the victor. As the hymn says, "Towering over the wrecks of time" is the cross of Christ who died and lived again. The turning of the tears of guilt.

And, of course, there is *the dark drag of grief*. I have seen a three-year-old crying inconsolably at the news of his grandmother's death. A woman weeps for her husband; a strong man for his best friend. Passing, passing, they are all the time passing away from us, those people whom we love. The time involved in the cycle of grieving can mean that many of us never stop mourning, for years and years. In this covid outbreak we feel more acutely the sadness of death occurring all the time every day of every year. The darkling drag of grief moves like a great secret current beneath all our joys.

Yet I have seen the turning of the tears here as well. A woman speaks of a feeling of presence surrounding her at the time of her loss. A feeling that the other was all right, and not far from her. A feeling of being loved and kept, deeper than the depths of grief, quieter and stronger than the pain. A man speaks of a dream in which he sees his departed beloved and knows that she is all right, and that he will see her again.

Many, many times I have heard stories of the curtain between this world and the next parting ever so slightly at the time of death. Connection, presence, love, hope were communicated and remembered for years.

These signs of hope arise from a reality deeper than the ocean with its dark drags of fear, guilt and grief. Christ is risen. We too shall be raised to new life with him. Death has not magically gone away. But in the turning of the tears, a new

hope has entered our living. There is more life to come, and the author of that life is full of love.

Tears are ahead of us to be sure, tears of grief, and fear, and guilt. But in the resurrection we discover that we may bring our tears to God. We may come with open hearts and outstretched hands. God is the great turner of the tears. The dark drag of the nameless depths is held in the palm of his nail-pierced hand. Jesus lives. He gives us no magic wand to wave away every problem. But he has made a way through for us. Out of sorrow there can grow not bitterness but joy. Tears can be turned now. Grief gives way to peace, guilt to healing, fear to love.

Four hundred years ago, a pastor brought this all home for us. He spoke to his own heart on Easter morning. He tried to rally his own soul to realize the significance of the day. He called upon his heart to turn from the dark drag of griefs and fears to look upward to the starlight of eternal life through Jesus resurrection. He realized how he could be joined to that resurrection. George Herbert wrote:

Arise sad heart. If thou dost not withstand,
Christ's resurrection thine may be.
Do not by hanging down break from the hand,
Which as it rises, raises thee.
Arise! Arise!²

Do you see the picture? Jesus in his rising extends his hand. He takes hold of ours as he goes up. "Come with me!" he says. My resurrection can be your resurrection. But we must not act like a three old who pulls down against the hand of his mother in the store, struggling to break free, to run off into his own misery. "Do not by hanging down break from the hand which as it rises, raises thee." Don't let the dark drag of fear, or guilt, or grief undo your hope in Jesus' resurrection. We swim between starlight and ocean depth. Stroke after stroke. Only now, on Easter, as your arm rises upwards from the water to take the next stroke, and your head turns up to the sky, look to Jesus. See him risen. Look not down into the ocean abyss of your circumstances. Look upward to the starlight of eternal faith, hope and love that Jesus has won. Arise.

Mary turned round and saw Jesus. He spoke her name. And her tears were turned. He speaks your name as well, deeply into your heart. Jesus is the great turner of the tears. Jesus lives again. Arise!

¹ Robert Penn Warren, "Chthonian Revelation" from *Rumor Verified* (New York: Random House, 1980).

² George Herbert, "The Dawning," in Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Love Bade Me Welcome: Daily Readings with George Herbert* (Lenoir, NC: Glen Lorien Books, 1997), p. 89