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The Gospel of John
LV. Why Are You Weeping?
John 20:1-18

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Mary Magdalene got there first. Early in the morning – in fact, it was still dark when she set out – early in the morning she arrived at the tomb to find the stone rolled away, the tomb open. She ran back to the disciples in deep distress – saying to them, *“They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”* Peter and John sprang up at her report and ran with Mary back to the tomb. John got there first and saw that the tomb was indeed open. Peeking in, he saw the graveclothes Jesus had been wrapped in folded up and lying where His body had been. Peter got there a few seconds later and pushed his way into the tomb itself – John then following him in. Scripture says at that moment they believed – but also notes very clearly that what they believed was not that Jesus was risen from the dead, but only that Mary’s report was correct – that someone had come in the night and removed His body. Peter and John then went to where the rest of the disciples were staying.

Mary lingered, weeping. For her, this was one last twist of the knife – first they had arrested Him, then they had crucified Him, and now they had stolen His body under the cover of darkness and hid it away. Mary was weeping as she then stooped down to look into the tomb for herself – as if maybe, somehow, this time His body would still be there. But it was not. Instead two figures were sitting where Jesus’ body had been laid, one sitting where His head had been, one at His feet. Somehow – maybe from the grief, maybe from the shock of His body not being there, and maybe just because it was hard to see clearly through her tears – but somehow Mary doesn’t seem to have recognized them as angels. Usually when angels appear, there is little doubt. But the angels speak to her, asking her, *“Woman, why are you weeping?”* Through her tears she answers, *“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”*

And having said this, she senses that someone has walked up and is standing behind her. And again, maybe it was because of the tears, maybe it was because of the early morning light, or maybe it was something to do with Him, with His resurrected body. But whatever it was, she didn’t recognize Him. She thought He must be the gardener – the tomb, remember, had been carved out in the midst of a garden. In any case, the man speaks to her, repeating the question of the angels: *“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?”* She cries out, *“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”*

And then it happens – the first fruit of Jesus’ resurrection of the dead: Mary’s resurrection from sorrow into joy. The man, the gardener, speaks to her again, this time calling her by her name: *“Mary.”* And suddenly she sees, she knows, she recognizes – it is Him. And He is not

dead, not mislaid – He is alive! He calls her by her name, and suddenly her grief turns into awe, her sorrow turns into joy, her weeping turns into laughter. She cries out, “*Rabboni!*” “*Teacher!*” The first fruit of His resurrection – our sorrow turned into joy.¹

Remember what Jesus had said back in John 10 – that chapter where He spoke of being our Good Shepherd.² “*The sheep hear his voice,*” Jesus had said, “*and he calls his own sheep by name.*”³ The risen Jesus calls Mary by name and Mary hears His voice – and suddenly her weeping turns into joy. “*The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name.*” In the midst of our own woundedness, sorrow, and grief; in the midst of all our fears and hopes and desires; in the midst even of the ordinariness of each passing day – this now is true, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead – this now is true: that our risen Lord knows us by name, is calling us each one by name. Each one of us, individually are known to Him, loved by Him, precious to Him – and He is calling us in each and every moment of our existence, calling us by name. That is how much we matter to Him. He knows us by name, He calls us by name. Our lives matter, first and foremost and above every other reason – our lives matter because they matter so much to Him. They matter so much to Him that He calls to us by our name. We are His sheep and He is our Good Shepherd.

“*God has simply decided,*” is how Martin Luther, the great Reformer once put it – or, at least as a modern translation of his catechism puts it:

God has simply decided . . . God knows you better than anyone else could—inside out, upside down, and backwards. God knows where you are strong and where you are weak, what you are most proud of and what you would most like to hide. Be that as it may, God’s decision is made. . . . This is the decision: God has decided to be your God. For God wants to be as close to you as your next breath, to be the one who gives you confidence and value, to open a future to you in the freedom of the Word. God wants to be the one to whom you turn for whatever you need.⁴

“*Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’*” The first fruit of His resurrection from the dead – is to know, to now know with all certainty – that we are known, that we are cherished, that we are precious in His sight each and every one. He is risen for us – that He might call us by our name, call us to Himself, turn our sorrow into the joy of being the sheep of His pasture and the flock of His hand.⁵ For He is our Good Shepherd, never to forsake us, never to forget us, but always to love us and to call us by our name – so that we will never doubt how much we matter to Him.

“*Rabboni!*” “*Teacher!*” Mary exclaims when she hears Him call her by her name – “*Rabboni!*” And clearly she must then have reached out to embrace Him, for He stops her. “*Do not cling to me,*” He says to her, “*for I have not yet ascended to the Father.*” “*Do not cling to me,*” He says to her – and, let us be honest, it is to us a strange prohibition. Why could she not embrace Him? What had changed? Was it something about Him or something about them both? What had changed?

What had changed is the substance of the second fruit of His resurrection from the dead: that the old life had passed away, and behold the new life had begun – for Him, for Mary, and for

us all. That's how Paul puts it in his second letter to the Corinthians: *"Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he or she is a new creation. The old has passed away, the new has begun."*⁶ Before His death, Jesus was indeed *"Rabboni"* – the Teacher, the revealer of God's Word to Mary and the Twelve and to all who had ears to hear. But now that old identity – because of His death and resurrection – has been supplanted. Maybe not replaced so much as transcended – for He is still our Teacher. But because He has died for our sins and risen from the dead, He is now something so much more than Teacher, Rabboni. He is Savior – our Savior.

"Do not cling to me," He says to Mary – because now, as our Savior, as the One who has defeated death and redeemed us from our sin, what matters is not what He has been, but what He has become. And so also, therefore, what matters is no longer what we have been but rather what we, in Him, shall now become. Not who we have been and what we have done, but who in Christ our Savior, we now shall become, and all that we shall now be able to do and enjoy because of His salvation at work within us. *"Do not cling to me as I was,"* He is saying to Mary, *"For now it is I who shall lay hold of you – in all things and through all things to give you all good things."* To give us new life, resurrected life, abundant life.

The second fruit of Jesus' resurrection for us – that the old has passed away, and the new has begun. And it is nothing less than the coming to be, the coming to pass, of all those promises He made to us in John's Gospel about how our lives could be made new, made richer and fuller, made deeper and joyful and resilient. To the Samaritan woman at the well – remember? *"Whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty forever. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."*⁷ That's the new thing, the new life, which can now be ours through Him, resurrected from the dead.

Or remember what He said to Nicodemus about being born again? Nicodemus had said that was impossible.⁸ But now that Jesus Himself has been raised to life anew – Himself in a sense having been born again – now our being born again, being born anew, being born from on high is a very real possibility only waiting for us to want it and to ask for it. *"Do you want to be healed?"* – remember Jesus had asked the lame man at the pool at Bethesda – *"Do you want to be healed."*⁹ And when the man said that he did, Jesus said to him, *"Get up; take up your bed and walk"* – and immediately it had happened!¹⁰ He was healed – in an instant his old life gone and a new life begun!

And on and on, remember, Jesus had talked about precisely this gift of new life, of the old life made new. To the crowd at the Feast of Booths: *"If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink . . . Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water."*¹¹ To the woman caught in adultery: *"Neither do I condemn you for what you have done. Go and leave your sin behind you."*¹² To the disciples at the Last Supper: *"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full"*¹³ – joy instead of weeping, new life instead of old dead-ends and diminishments. Again and again and again Rabboni told us that we could trade old lives for new, shallow living for deep living, mere existence for purposeful serving. Rabboni taught us this again and again and again – that all things can be made new, our lives can be made new.

But now that He is no longer merely Rabboni, now that He has risen from the dead and so become our Savior, now all that He told us about that new life, all that He said would be possible

for us in Him and through Him – all of it now has become possible for us, only waiting for us to want it, to ask for it, to receive it from His hands. We can be made new.

Henri Nouwen:

*We are fearful people. We are afraid of conflict, war, an uncertain future, illness, and, most of all, death. This fear takes away our freedom and gives our society the power to manipulate us with threats and promises. When we can reach beyond our fear to the One who loves us with a love that was there before we were born and will be there after we die, then oppression, persecution, and even death will be unable to take our freedom. Once we have come to the deep inner knowledge . . . that we are born out of love and will die into love, that every part of our being is deeply rooted in love . . . then all forms of evil, illness, and death lose their final power over us . . .*¹⁴

And we become new. The second fruit of His resurrection from the dead for us: we no longer have to cling to what has been, to the same old not-working-well patterns of living, to the same old worn-out and broken-down thoughts and feelings. For He is now holding out to us something so much better – what we can now become in Him, through Him, because of Him, for Him. The One who is risen to become our Savior.

“*But go to my brothers,*” Jesus then tells Mary, “*and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’*” And herein lies the third fruit of His resurrection for us – the greatest of them all. That as death could not keep Him from life, so now death will not keep us from life. That as death could not keep Him from Heaven, so now death will not keep us from Heaven either. That as death could not hold Him, could not destroy Him, could not even diminish Him – so now, because He is risen from the dead, so now death has no power over us anymore. The third fruit of His resurrection for us: because He lives, we shall live also.

Two weeks ago, when we listened to Jesus as He cried out from the cross, we said that the Good News of the Gospel meets us in our great fear of death with two great promises – two great promises which remove our fear of death and give us powerful reassurance and hope in the face of death. The first, as we saw then, is His promise that He will be with us in our dying. That we do not die alone, but with Him beside us, driving out all our fear and leading us safely through our death: “*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; for thou art with me, thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.*”¹⁵ That was the first promise.

And now, this morning of His resurrection, we receive the second promise: that because He has overcome death, so shall we. Because He has been raised from death into life eternal, so shall He raise us up from death into life eternal. Because He has been raised from the dead, death itself shall be the one to die – and we shall live with Him, and with one another in Him, forevermore.

“Say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” His words call us back to John 14 – the words He spoke to His disciples at the Last Supper: *“I go to prepare a place for you” – “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.” “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.”*¹⁶ Through His resurrection from the dead, He prepares the way, opens the way, for our resurrection from the dead.

Remember also what He said to Martha after her brother Lazarus had died. She was mad at Him because He had arrived too late to keep Lazarus from dying: *“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.”*¹⁷ And remember how He then answered her – how He said to her that, in fact, death no longer matters, for death no longer wins: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”*¹⁸ Shall never even really die – how can He have said that? Because He was on His way even then to defeat death once and for all, and for our sake.

The third fruit of His resurrection from the dead is that now death can no longer hurt us – the worst it can do is simply hasten us into His nearer presence, bring us into that promised life in His Kingdom – a life so filled with love and joy and peace that we cannot now even begin to imagine it. And so – because He is risen from the dead – and so the end, when it comes for us, will be nothing more than a new beginning, an entrance into a never-ending reunion with all the saints in glory, the start of happily-ever-after for us, and for all His saints with us, in the glorious Kingdom of our God.

That day when our weeping, like Mary’s, shall become unending rejoicing.

*Now let the heavens be joyful,
Let earth her song begin,
The round world keep high triumph,
And all that is therein;
Let all things seen and unseen
Their notes together blend,
For Christ the Lord is risen,
Our joy that hath no end.*¹⁹

¹ See Psalm 30:5, 11; John 16:20.

² John 10:14.

³ John 10:3.

⁴ James A. Nestingen and Gerhard O. Forde, Free to Be: A Handbook to Luther’s Small Catechism (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1993), pp. 5-6.

⁵ Psalm 95:7, 100:3.

⁶ II Corinthians 5:17.

⁷ John 4:14.

⁸ John 3:1-15.

⁹ John 5:6.

¹⁰ John 5:8-9.

¹¹ John 7:37-38.

¹² John 8:11.

¹³ John 15:11.

¹⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, Our Greatest Gift: A Meditation on Dying and Caring (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), p. 17.

¹⁵ Psalm 23:4.

¹⁶ John 14:2-3.

¹⁷ John 11:21.

¹⁸ John 11:25-26.

¹⁹ From the hymn, "Thine Is the Glory," by Edmond Louis Budry.