

Binkley Baptist Church

“Weep and Witness, Mary”

by The Rev. Dr. Marcus McFaul

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Easter Sunday

John 20:1-18

Oh how I love this day—Easter day! Lilies, trumpets, glad alleluias, full house, quiche and casseroles, and resurrection. What’s not to love? And I knew a little rain wouldn’t keep you Baptists away today.

But—this won’t surprise you—some stay away from church on Easter Sunday and it doesn’t have to do with fighting the crowd or displeasure that strangers have taken their pew. No, some stay away because they don’t want a harangue—however well spoken—about an event that flies in the face of reason, science, and good sense.

Most of you know that at one time in our country most churches and colleges were wed. Then most got divorced, the colleges pleading mental cruelty! Religious dogmatism got in the way of honest scholarship and knowledge. The church has given academia and other institutions plenty to be suspicious about religion and religious claims. Yet “misuse should not negate right use” I think.

The great Presbyterian pastor-preacher-scholar George Buttrick tells the story of boarding a plane for home in NYC and mid-flight pulls out from this satchel a Bible and pen and paper to work on his Sunday sermon. The man next to him asks him what he’s doing and Buttrick answers, “Working on my sermon, I’m a pastor.” “Oh,” the man said rather dismissively. “Well I don’t get caught up in the complexities of religion— I keep it simple, ‘do unto others as you’d have them do to you.’ Golden rule, that’s my religion.”

“What do you do for a living?” Buttrick asked. The man proudly puffed out his chest, “Why, I’m an astronomer. I teach astrophysics down at the university.” “Ah, yes, astronomy,” Buttrick said. “Well, I don’t like to get caught up in the complexities of astrophysics. ‘Twinkle, twinkle, little star, how I wonder what you are.’ That’s my astronomy.”

Some stay away because it sounds either too glib or too simple or just too unbelievable. Why have your intelligence beaten up on an otherwise good day? And some stay away because they wonder how Christians can say so triumphantly that Jesus is risen when so many around the world seem like they’re still hanging on crosses. How can we sing songs of triumph over the powers of evil, death and hell when—just this week in our state—the clock turned back and rights for our LGBT sisters and brothers were removed. Shameful.

And more terror, this time Brussels. And. And. And—you fill out this list. It makes you want to cry. And this is exactly where the Easter story begins—with tears. Tears, not triumph, start the Easter pageant. In John, have you noticed how much crying is part of the tale? Unlike many men our evangelist John isn’t interested in covering up open, public, vulnerable grief. A loss has been experienced and there’s mourning in the morning. Mary Magdalene has gone to the tomb to pay her respects and discovers the tombstone removed. Even his place of burial disturbed and so Mary ran with the news—not of resurrection but news of theft—telling Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they laid him.” The two men race to the tomb and Peter—ever the bold one—goes in to find linen wrappings, but no body. The other disciple finally went in after Peter and surveyed the

scene, then—wait for it, “returned to their homes.” They left her there weeping! Peter’s strong suit was never pastoral care and counseling.

“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb...As she wept... (One of the two angels) said, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?...Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’”

Notice all the tears. Easter begins with tears, always has and always will.

And the question: Why, why are you weeping?

I once asked my grandmother what she thought was most interesting about the story of Easter and she said, “Only men would ask such a silly question ‘why are you weeping’ to a woman at a cemetery. “ When I told her that technically an “angel” was the first one to ask Mary that question, she said: “and only a man would say that!”

Why are you weeping, Mary? All of us know why. Grief is the price you pay for love. If you love, you will grieve. And right there out in the open we see the vulnerability of Mary’s loss and love.

“They’ve taken away my Lord and I don’t know where they’ve laid him,” she says. She says it three times; to the two disciples, to the two white robed angels, and to the one she assumes must be a gardener. Jesus, the gardener.

Jesus returns not as a conquering hero but as a stranger. In all these post resurrection appearances not a single person recognizes the risen Jesus at first sight. For Mary he was a gardener she supposed. For all—Jesus is encountered first as a stranger, the ‘other;’ so for all this uncivil campaign discourse which demonizes the ‘stranger’ and wants to keep out refugees and others: be very careful ‘cause you will likely be barring Jesus.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” In that moment, a recognition. A seeing. Oscar Romero, the martyred El Salvadoran archbishop, once said: “There are many things that can only be seen through eyes that have cried.” He gives her her name. Sometimes grief becomes God’s best chance to enter our lives anew and we discover that we’re awakened or reawakened by the sound of our name.

Frederick Buechner tells the story of attending an Easter service where his friend, a minister, was the celebrant at the Eucharist. One by one, people moved forward to receive the bread and wine and heard, ‘body of Christ, cup of salvation.’ As Buechner approached, his friend said, “Freddie; the body of Christ and the cup of salvation.” Buechner testified and gave witness that at the sound of his own name he was astonished in that moment by the power of love. That’s how it happens when we sense that we are known and loved and remembered.

In the earlier scripture text today from Isaiah 43:1; “do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Called you—each one of you by name—as one of God’s precious own. Is that part of what Mary heard at the sound of her name? You’ll recall that at Jesus’ baptism he hears the sound of the Spirit’s voice call out, “You are my Son, the Beloved, and with you I am well-pleased;” it serves as the head-waters of his embrace of his mission to witness to the kingdom of God. Does hearing her name, “Mary,” serve that same function—from weeper to witness? The source of her new life is the voice of the risen Christ.

“Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’ and she told them that he (Jesus) had said these things to her.”

Witness. I have seen the Lord is the continuing witness and testimony of the Christian Church.

All the Gospels agree that the women got there first. And women brought the first word of the resurrection. And in John it’s Mary alone.

Mary of Magdala—the village town Magdala on the Sea of Galilee, perhaps her hometown. She refused to abandon Jesus on Golgotha. She took it all in. She is the only woman named in each of the four gospels. She was the first to the tomb and she is the first one Jesus appears to. First weeper, first witness. Witness of both his crucifixion and his resurrected appearance, Mary Magdalene.

What does this and all the other post-resurrection stories mean? Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan their book *The Last Week* say two themes emerge.

1) Jesus lives! He continues to be experienced after his death, though in a radically new way. Jesus is a figure in the present, not simply of the past. Jesus is a living reality. This is the nature of “witness”, we testify to the power of the living Christ in our lives.

2) God has vindicated Jesus. “God has said ‘yes’ to Jesus and ‘no’ to the powers who executed him...the authors of the gospels do not speak about Jesus’ resurrection without speaking about his crucifixion by the collusion between collaborators and imperial power.”

It’s not weep or witness; it’s weep and witness. Death and resurrection. Good Friday and Easter.

“Easter affirms that the domination systems of this world”—filled with violence and death dealing and oppression and privilege—“are not of God and that they do not have the final word.” (Borg, Crossan pg. 205-206).

We feed the hungry and walk the CROP Walk. We clothe the naked, and we advocate for the poor, the stranger, the forgotten and forsaken; we try to live the biblical mandate to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,” because that was what Jesus did and God has vindicated this Jesus whom the authorities killed.

We do what he did. We say what he said. And often with tears in our eyes in the doing and in the saying we are mysteriously witnessing to the resurrection. This doesn’t make any of this unambiguous and it’s more than OK to have lots and lots of questions.

Lutheran Pastor Heidi Neumark tells the story of her little Lutheran church located in the South Bronx (NYC)—one of the poorest of the poor neighborhoods in America. She describes one Palm Sunday a couple years back:

*During Holy Week several years ago, this congregation decided to reenact in a passion play the whole sweep of Holy Week, from Palm Sunday to Easter. They began by dramatizing Jesus’ entry into the city, borrowing a live donkey and, led by an actor playing the part of Jesus, parading in a long procession around the block of shabby storefronts and run-down apartments shouting, “Hosanna!” When they got around the block and back to the door of the church, the Palm Sunday procession ran into a street demonstration protesting police brutality. It was fitting, really, as Jesus and the protesters, the congregation and the street crowds, the cries of “Hosanna!” and the cries of social outrage mingled together in a swirl of movement and noise. In fact, someone passing by on the street, seeing the confusion, and fearing trouble, even called the police, whose arrival brought a bit of added color and drama. Somehow the processional managed to make it inside the church, where, as the play unfolded, Jesus was tried, condemned, and executed. But then women returned early in the morning of the first day of the week with the amazing word of an empty tomb and the astounding news, “He is risen!” the actors playing the disciples remained true to their assigned parts, expressing disbelief and confidence that this news from the women was but an “idle tale.”*

*But then the script called for three members of the congregation to stand up and give testimony, to bear witness in court as it were, to the truth of the resurrection. “I know that he is alive,” each one was to begin. The first was Angie. “I know that he is alive,” she said, “because he alive in me.” She then told*

*how she was abused by her father, how she fell into despair and alcoholism, became HIV-positive. But then she responded to the welcome of the church, then she started attending worship, then a Bible study, and bit by bit she rose from the grave of her life. Now she is a seminary student, studying to be a pastor. "I am now alive because Jesus Christ lives in me and through me," Angie said, her face aglow. "I am a temple of the Holy Spirit."*

*The two other witnesses stood in turn, each reciting the assigned part of the script: "I know that he is alive." Then that portion of the play was done, and it was time to move on. But the testimony would not stop. Others in the sanctuary began to rise spontaneously. "I know that he is alive," they would say, "because he is alive in me." Homeless people, addicts now clean, the least and the lost, stood one by one. Nothing could stop them. "I know that he is alive," they shouted, all giving corroborating testimony to the witness of Jesus, adding their own word to the great witness of Easter, telling their truth about what they had seen and heard.*

(as told in Tom Long's book, *Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian*, pgs. 30-31)

It's very hard to argue with a witness. It's not for you or me to authenticate or verify what anyone else says about the reality of Jesus in their life.

Weep and witness, Mary. Don't be ashamed of either tears or testimony.

Witness—tell your story—of how you saw Jesus in disguise and how he called you by name. I hear tell of how new life continues to be given and how folk tell, "I have seen the Lord."

Another Mary, poet Mary Oliver has wisdom for us this Easter Day that bespeaks of all Mary's and for all witnesses to new resurrected life. From her poem, "Sometimes" (*Red Bird*, 2008)

Pay attention.  
Be astonished.  
Tell about it.

Thanks be to God. Amen. And amen.