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SEEING THE LORD THROUGH TEARS

John 20:11-18 ; Evelyn Marlys Poulson Funeral; November 28, 2025

A common sight when someone dies, and at funerals, is tears. I'm sure that some tears have been shed since Evelyn died. We are sad when a loved one dies; we shed tears of sorrow. The reality of death is that it takes something from us; death is a robber that breaks in and steals what is dear to us and won't give it back. We never know what will trigger our tears – certain memories, things we notice, seeing the tears of others. We cry over what we have lost; we even shed tears over what we won't have in the future. If you don't cry at a loved one's funeral, people might think there's something wrong with you.

Sometimes when we are crying, someone might suggest that Christians shouldn't cry since we know that Jesus has died and risen from the dead to take our Christian loved ones to heaven with Him. Rather, we should be happy for that person. This, I suppose, is people trying to be helpful and supportive, but I don't find it very helpful. Sadness at death is natural. Even Jesus, John's Gospel tells us, wept at the gravesite of His dead friend Lazarus – and He did this with the full knowledge that He was about to raise him from the dead. If Jesus, the perfect God-man cried at a funeral, we should be able to do so without shame.

Our Gospel Reading from John 20 of Jesus rising from the dead describes the experiences of Mary Magdalene at Jesus' tomb. Mary had gone early to the tomb on Easter Sunday, setting out in the dark before dawn with some other women to finish the embalming of Jesus' dead body. Wondering how they would be able to roll back the large stone blocking His grave, they were astonished to see it had been removed and the body Jesus was gone. They ran back to tell His disciples what they had discovered.

After this Mary returned to the tomb, which is where our Gospel text today picks up. She was crying at the tomb, which was located in a garden area. In the garden, she was crying at the death of Jesus. She was crying that she could not do anything more for Him and His body. She was crying because His body was gone and she thought someone had stolen it for some terrible reason. She was crying, probably with some frustration and maybe even with some anger.

Through her tears, Mary looked into the tomb again. What happened next? **And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.” Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?” Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, “Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned and said to Him in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means Teacher).**

Through her tears Mary saw Jesus, but she did not at first recognize Him. This is a problem. When we are grieving at a death and it prevents us from seeing and recognizing Jesus – not with these eyes but with the eyes of faith – that He is no longer dead but alive, this is a problem. The worst sort of blindness caused by tears of sorrow are those from a lack of faith in God, the tears flowing from people with no hope because they do not know and believe that Jesus has died and risen for them and for all people. That sort of sorrow is inconsolable.

Seeing our loved one dead and buried means that they are gone forever from this life. Yes, we have our memories, but those will fade. And our memories are not always as good as we would want. There are things we might want to forget about someone, but can't. We keep loved ones in our hearts and thoughts, but that can't bring them back to life. And when those who hold them in their memories also die, does that mean that they are forgotten and gone forever? If that thought doesn't bring tears to your eyes, what will?

One of the things Evely enjoyed in life was doing word searches, at least until her eyes gave out. When you can't see anymore, you can't find what you are looking for.

Thankfully, the eyes of faith can keep seeing Jesus, even through tears. Mary's tears at first had prevented her from seeing her Lord Jesus alive. What changed that? Mary heard Jesus' words and voice. When Jesus called her by name, she finally recognized His voice even though she could not see him clearly through her tears.

This is something I hope happens to you today through your tears. God has given you His Word in Christ, that Jesus had died and risen for as your Good Shepherd. Jesus, God's own Son, came to earth to search out and find His sheep lost in sin and unbelief and on the way to death and the grave, and lead us through the valley of the shadow of death to live with Him forever. We need to hear Jesus calling us by name and His comforting words when we are facing death.

What Jesus said to Mary after she finally recognized Him through her tears is meant for us as well. **“Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.’”** Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, **“I have seen the Lord”—and that He had said these things to her.**

Like Mary, we would like to cling to our living loved ones in this life like she wanted to hold onto Jesus, but she could not, and neither can we. Jesus' point is that the answer to death in this world is not to cling to the things of this world that are passing away, but to cling to the life of the world to come when Jesus returns on the Last Day. Jesus told Mary that He still needed to ascend into heaven where He would rule at His Father's right hand. When we have faith in Jesus, His Father in heaven is also **Our Father who art in heaven**. We will see Jesus return in glory to raise us from the dead and take us and all believers to be with Him in heaven.

St. Paul, in Ephesians two, reminds us that this is God's plan for us in Christ Jesus. **But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages He might show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.**

Today we see the risen Lord Jesus through our tears of sorrow at Evelyn's death. On that great we will see Him through tears of Joy to live together forever in glory. Amen.