

Laughter Through Tears

by

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John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw

and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

In the last century, during a previous time when the world was spinning in trauma and grief, an eighteen-year-old German physics student named Jurgen Moltmann was drafted to serve in the army. It was at the height of World War Two, when he was assigned to an anti-aircraft battery, and he saw the firebombing horror firsthand. After Germany surrendered, he spent three years in British prison camps, where he noticed how other prisoners reacted when Hitler's empire imploded exposing its brutal immorality at its core. They "collapsed inwardly" he wrote later, giving up all hope, and some of them died for lack of it.

Moltmann had not grown up with any faith, but an American chaplain gave him an Army-issue New Testament and Psalms, signed by President Roosevelt. He read the Psalms and found the hope he so desperately needed. He became convinced that God was with him, even behind the barbed wire of prison. He was transferred to a camp run by the YMCA, where he learned more about the Christian faith, and experienced the love and mercy of God. So after the war, Jurgen Moltmann went on to become a leading Christian theologian who focused his work on two primary sources of Christian hope: God is with us in our suffering; and God is leading us to a better future.

With a faith that was forged out of trauma, death and despair, the theologian wrote: "God is not satisfied with the way the world is today, and God intends to make all things new... Moltmann said: "With Easter the laughter of the redeemed, and the dance of the liberated... begins. God weeps with us so that we may someday laugh with God. Easter is God's protest against death." ¹

That, my friends, is the hope of the gospel. Given the year we have been through, what a glorious way to greet this morning. With Easter the laughter of the redeemed begins.

¹ This familiar Moltmann story found for this occasion online at ChristianintyToday.org, 8/29/05, in article by Philip Yancey, "God Behind Barbed Wire."

I imagine Mary Magdalene wondered if she would ever laugh again. According to John's gospel, Mary goes to the tomb before dawn, when it was still dark. She goes to mourn the death of Jesus who had healed her and so many others, who had filled her heart with hope and joy. In a world of rigid hierarchy Jesus had treated her, and others like her, on the bottom rung of any social standing, with respect and kindness. His teachings about God made sense and led people to show forth love and compassion. And, now her friend and teacher who was gentle and wise and loving was dead, dead at the hands of the powers that be. She is mourning the loss of Jesus, and with his death her own hopes have ceased, her dreams have died and her worst fears realized.

Furthermore, when she went to the tomb to pay her respects, the tomb is empty. Jesus is missing, and the only thing that makes sense of this is that someone has stolen his body and taken him away. For all of these reasons, we know she is overwhelmed with grief, because John tells us three times, Mary is weeping. After Peter and the other disciple come and go from the empty tomb, Mary stands beside it weeping. The angels ask her, why are you weeping? The Risen Lord, whom she mistakes for the gardener, asks her why are you weeping?

This Easter story knows that we, like Mary, come to the surprising joy of resurrection faith through tears. What a year of weeping this has been: with the sad isolation of the pandemic, the death of countless loved ones, the killing of innocent people by the powers that be, the eruptions of violence that have carried far too many away. All of it, according to psychologists has sent our nervous systems into overdrive, leaving us survivors with memory problems, short fuses, fractured productivity, and sudden drops into despair and depression.

So today we, like Mary, come to Easter morning having stared into the black hole of some tomb or another wondering where is God? Have they taken the Lord away?

Then the Risen Lord takes Mary by surprise and calls her by name. That is when the laughter of the redeemed, and the dance of the liberated begins. She must have lunged forward for some kind of embrace, because Jesus says, “Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to my God and your God.” Mary cannot get her arms around Jesus any more than we can get our heads around what happened exactly... because it is in the nature of God to surprise us with good news of great joy.

“The joy promised in the Bible comes from elsewhere,” writes scholar Kathleen O’Connor. “Human effort does not produce Christian joy. It comes from outside frames of human expectation. Joy comes unbidden, when least expected, when it is so far from possibility that the very idea of it seems worthy of scorn. Biblical joy is always a reversal of expectations, an overturning of weeping, of loss, of death itself.” Easter joy is the gift of life in the teeth of death.” O’Connor says finally: “It is the laughter of believers that awaits us all.”²

Over this last year, the *New York Times* published a series of interviews by philosopher George Yancy with people of different faiths about what they believe about death and faith. One of these interviews was with Christian theologian Karen Teel. George Yancey does not himself believe in God, and he told Karen Teel that physicist Stephen Hawking called faith in a God who brings life out of death “a fairy tale for people afraid of the dark.” He asked her, “How do you as a Christian respond to the charge that Christians are simply afraid of the dark?”

Karen Teel told Yancy that she had recently cared for her mother as she gradually lost her battle with A.L.S., the disease that had also claimed Stephen Hawking’s life. The disease was relentless and cruel, she said. Her mother had been an accomplished pianist, but at the end, her body had deteriorated to the place where Teel had to help her with everything: eating, bathing, controlling her wheelchair, even breathing.

² Kathleen O’Connor, “Easter Joy,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2000, p. 31.

But as she journeyed with her mother toward death, she found that in her sorrow, her own faith was renewed. “Before facing my mother’s death,” she said, “I never really knew that I believed that life continues, but in caring for my mother, I discovered that I know it, as I know the sun will come up in the morning, as I know I’ll get wet in the rain, as I know I love my own children. It isn’t about fear. It’s a gift and a mystery, this conviction that we come from love and we return to love.”³

Mary Magdalene wasn’t afraid of the dark. She went through the dark to the tomb and found it empty. Through her tears she saw how God has a way of surprising us! Through human sadness and hopelessness a gift arrives, wrapped in a mystery, and it dawns on us that we have come from love and will return to love. And so on Easter, the laughter of the redeemed, and the dance of the liberated begin.

³ Thomas G. Long, “Tread Marks and Roses: Glimpses of Resurrection,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2021, p. 4