

John 20. Meet Jesus for the end of tears

“Woman, why are you crying?”

We get Mary’s tears.

Tears at the loss of her teacher and friend, cruelly killed, unjustly killed, on a cross.

Held in till now, held in while she still had one last service to perform for him.

Tears at the pain of the further cruelty, the removal, as she thought, by those who had crucified Jesus, of his body – for no grave robber would have left behind the linen clothes in which Jesus had been buried – the removal which prevented her showing one final act of love, the proper burial of Jesus’ body hastily placed in a tomb late that Friday afternoon before the Sabbath

It is this she focuses on

they’ve taken away my Lord,” she told them, “and I don’t know where they’ve put him.”

The petty injustice after the big injustice of his judicial murder causing her tears to overflow

We know it matters to have the body

Matters so much that we have no body, no parole laws

Established because, in the words of the enquiry conducted before Queensland introduced its law in 2017, “withholding the location of a body extends the suffering of a victim’s family and all efforts should be made to attempt to minimise the sorrow.” [Sofranoff enquiry].

We get Mary’s tears because they are our human tears.

Our lives are marked by loss

Loss of those we love

And we know tears at their absence – sometimes just welling up in us, catching us unawares

The unbidden, aching, grief

And our lives are marred by injustice, by the indifferent or deliberate cruelty of others that leaves us weeping in helpless frustration and anger at the hurt done to us and others

Most of us have felt that at some time

Seeing the children’s bodies, maimed or dead, being dragged from ruined buildings in Gaza or Ukraine

Or Hearing of people having been struck by a car, and then left injured and dying on the side of the road as the driver flees

When we experience being belittled, or callously abandoned

tears of grief, tears of powerless frustration and impotent anger at wrong – that is the human experience in which we all share at some time in our lives, coming together here in Mary’s weeping

Helpless tears

Tears that so often in this world are without comfort, shed till exhaustion

But Mary’s tears have a surprising end, one that Mary herself was not expecting.

She had come to the tomb, Luke tells us [Luke 23:55-24:1, 10], bringing spices and perfumes to anoint Jesus' corpse. And now she was searching for, asking for, a body.

¹⁴ Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know it was Jesus. ¹⁵ "Woman," Jesus said to her, "why are you crying? Who is it that you're seeking?"

Supposing he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you've carried him away, tell me where you've put him, and I will take him away."

That, the complete absence of any expectation that she would meet a living Jesus, and her tears, and the early hour, and her lack of focus on this man who asked her again "Why are you crying" explains why at first she did not recognize Jesus.

She thought He was just one of the staff, perhaps someone who might have been involved in moving the body

But then Jesus speaks her name

¹⁶ Jesus said to her, "Mary."

Turning around, she said to him in Aramaic, "Rabboni!"—which means "Teacher."

And she knows, she recognizes His voice

And turns now to focus on Him

"Rabboni", teacher.

She has no doubt it is the Jesus she loves and has followed

And that is the end of her crying, for now

More

You can hear her joy in her words to Jesus' disciples

"I have seen the Lord", a joy they will soon, that evening, share v. 20

A joy the intensity of which is hard for us to imagine

The grief and pain of the last few days

Of seeing her Lord abandoned, humiliated, cruelly killed

Ended

The wrongs done, reversed

The aching hole of His absence, filled with a renewed presence

Jesus, there, to be touched, held on to

Living – not in weakness, not just clinging to life

but with power and a confident authority

Some of us have lost people we love

Have known that grief

It might even be stirred up in you now as you think of Mary's tears

Imagine having them back – not in the pain and weakness you may have last seen them in

But in their prime, in the fullness of their strength

The familiar voice of one who knows you

But is Mary's story for real? Can we trust Mary's witness – "I have seen the Lord?"

And is she experiencing only a respite, a brief pause, in a life of tears – for Jesus speaks of departing, that His presence is a situation that cannot be held on to

¹⁷ "Don't cling to me," Jesus told her, "since I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them that I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

¹⁸ Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them what he had said to her.

Or does Jesus' resurrection mean something more for her, and for others? Does it mean a fundamental change, where now she can live with an abiding joy and the hope of the end of all tears, because the causes of the tears of this life – death and loss, injustice and cruelty – are dealt with?

Is Jesus' resurrection for real?

Does it bring a fundamental change to Mary's life in the present and future?

Can it bring a fundamental change to our present and future?

John, Jesus' messenger, the writer of this book we have been looking at over the last six weeks, is fully convinced Jesus' resurrection is for real

And John is also convinced that in Jesus' resurrection there is a hope for the end of all tears for Mary and all who believe in Jesus, hope for life in the place of death, a life that starts now – a present experience, and continues beyond death, a sure hope

You see that at the end of our chapter. He has given us this selection of Jesus' mighty works, he says,

John 20:³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

And we are about to look at the evidence he presents in this chapter for that promise being true

But Mary's tears tell us what is at stake

If you have ever shed tears like Mary, ever felt Mary's tears, you know that

To have a hope of sharing in a time when every tear is wiped away, never to return, because life has replaced death, because God has acted to reverse the hurt caused by injustice and indifference

Worth everything

And you also know it would need to be a sure hope to withstand the weight of the tears we shed

Before you could entrust yourself to that hope, find comfort in that hope, you would need to know you were not deceiving yourself

Better – before you could entrust yourself to the one that offered that hope, found comfort in the words of promise he speaks, you would need to know He was true, faithful and able to do all He promised

For it would be unbearably painful to have compounded grief with the shame and disappointment of being deceived.

And if you have not yet known Mary's tears – blessed life, but death and loss, injustice and grief will meet you in this life

And what will your hope and comfort be then?

So, knowing the stakes are high, what is the evidence John gives us for thinking Jesus is truly alive from the dead, and that in His resurrection there is joy for us now and hope for the end of all tears

For real?

Can we trust Mary's witness? Is the resurrection of Jesus, his being alive in the body in which He died, for real?

IF this was the only appearance of the risen Jesus you could doubt John's story.

You could think it is made up, or John is just passing on the imaginings of a grief stricken woman and discount what she said.

Many of John's hearers would have been tempted to do that, for they already discounted the testimony of women.

It was thought not to hold the same weight in court as the testimony of men

Just one example – the first century Jewish historian Josephus wrote "From women let no evidence be accepted, because of the levity and temerity of their sex" [Ant. 4.219 in Wright Resurrection p. 607 fn. 55]

Jesus who chose to appear first to women plainly did not agree with that, and the fact that all the gospels tell us the first witnesses to Jesus' resurrection were women is a great argument for their truthfulness

For that is not something you would make up in that culture if you were trying to persuade someone of the truth of what you are saying

The best reason for John persevering in including the witness of Mary is because that is the way it happened

And that John mentions Mary Magdalene by name, as do the other gospels, speaks of her being well known, and alive, or known first hand by others still alive, at the time of the writing of the gospel

She is mentioned by name as a well known person who could readily be consulted, or whose testimony could be consulted in others still alive who had known her personally

But Mary's meeting Jesus in her tears in the garden is not the only appearance of the risen Jesus

You heard two more in our reading.

Firstly to the ten apostles in the locked room on that first Sunday

John 20: ¹⁹When it was evening on that first day of the week, the disciples were gathered together with the doors locked because they feared the Jews. Jesus came, stood among them, and said to them, "Peace be with you."

²⁰Having said this, he showed them his hands and his side. So the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

The disciples are not expecting Jesus. Luke tells us they were 'startled and terrified' by His appearing [Luke 24:36-43]. They needed to hear the peace Jesus spoke to them.

Jesus then speaks with them, and in offering them His wounded hand and sides confirms He is the same person who had been crucified, taken down from the cross and entombed.

In fact, to help them overcome their amazement, in Luke it says he eats something before their eyes.

Luke 24:41 But while they still were amazed and in disbelief because of their joy, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" 42 So they gave him a piece of a broiled fish, 43 and he took it and ate in their presence.

And then a week later John records a second appearance

John 20:24 But Thomas (called "Twin"), one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25 So the other disciples were telling him, "We've seen the Lord!"

But he said to them, "If I don't see the mark of the nails in his hands, put my finger into the mark of the nails, and put my hand into his side, I will never believe."

We can be grateful for Thomas. He is a determined sceptic.

He is not going to run with the crowd, even if they are his ten mates with whom he has spent the best part of the last three years, people with whom previously he had been willing to die [John 11:16]

That dead men don't rise was as obvious to Thomas in the first century as it is now

Without the evidence of his own senses there is no way he is going to believe what his mates tell him.

He demands evidence that the Jesus he knows to have been killed on a cross is alive.

And Jesus graciously presents it

26 A week later his disciples were indoors again, and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Don't be faithless, but believe."

28 Thomas responded to him, "My Lord and my God!"

The witness of the apostles is not that they were expecting Jesus to be bodily alive and present amongst them after he was killed

They weren't

like us, they expected the dead to stay dead

And they weren't gullible people easily fooled

They were gutted, disappointed, fearful people, needing evidence

But they came to proclaim to the world that Jesus was alive, risen from the dead

And they are not just proclaiming an empty tomb, although a tomb with Jesus' body in it would have destroyed their witness

Just as the authorities presenting the body of Jesus at any time would have.

And they are not just proclaiming that Jesus' spirit is alive and a continuing influence on their lives

They proclaim him alive in the body in which he died, with the wounds inflicted in his crucifixion, to be seen and touched

And they do this, they say, because the Lord Jesus appeared to them and persuaded them by the proof of their senses - what they saw, what they heard, what they touched – persuaded them that, having been killed, he was now alive in the body in which he had been killed

And more appearances of the risen Jesus are recorded in the NT

John has another in John 21 – on the shore of the sea of Galilee

Luke records another appearance to two men on the road to Damascus

Matthew on a mountain in Galilee

The apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15 records many more appearances, including one to five hundred people at one time, many who were at Paul's time of writing still alive, as well as an appearance to Paul himself

Not stereotyped appearances as you would expect in grief induced hallucinations, but to different people in different places at different times of day with different content, different words and actions

Not just to individuals, but to groups – and whatever you are taking it is hard, impossible, to get a synchronised, shared, group hallucination

Mary's tears are not ended by an hallucination, a grief induced delusion

And her experience is not made up to deceive

John is passing on her real experience

Of tears stopped by the risen Jesus

But is the appearance of the risen Jesus just a moment of consolation in a life that will again be enveloped in grief and loss, in injustice and powerlessness?

It could appear so, for the risen Jesus speaks of going, of ascending to the Father, after a time leaving Mary and His other followers

And then they will again know, as we know, grief and loss, injustice and powerlessness

Those things still mark all our lives in the present, believers included

Sometimes especially the lives of believers, those living under persecution, enduring discrimination in employment and education, experiencing loss of property and liberty, and worse

But in our freedom and prosperity we still know sickness without cure and loss of those we love

Jesus' resurrection – present joy, sure hope

Why is Jesus' resurrection and His going to the Father, what Jesus calls in John along with His death on the cross His glorification [John 17:1-5], the cause for believers of enduring joy in the present and sure hope for the future, that good hope of the end of all tears for ever, despite their continuing experience of grief and loss, injustice and powerlessness?

Why could Jesus' resurrection and going to the Father be a cause of joy and hope for you?

John tells us.

Firstly, because of what Jesus' resurrection says of Jesus, that He is both God, the Son of God, and God's promised Christ, King of His people

Secondly, because of what the risen Jesus does for those who believe in Him

Let's unpack that, starting with what the resurrection says of Jesus

What the resurrection says of Jesus

Firstly, the resurrection confirms that Jesus is who He says He is, and that means He always had a bigger and better agenda than patching up our lives in this age

²⁷ Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and look at my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Don't be faithless, but believe."

²⁸ Thomas responded to him, "My Lord and my God!"

Did you hear what Thomas said when Jesus appeared to Him v. 28.

"My Lord and my God"

Was that a flash of new insight, a creative theological conclusion by Thomas?

No.

Thomas knew that only God can raise the dead.

Jesus, alive before Him, showed that God, the one God of Abraham and Moses, was affirming that the Lord Jesus had spoken the truth about Himself and His relation to the Father.

He was one with the Father, one who existed with the Father before Abraham was born [8:58], shared His glory from before Creation [17:5]

His words were the words of God, His acts the acts of God

The resurrection showed that Jesus, the Son of God sent from the Father, was God bringing the salvation to His people that the God of Israel had promised

The time when, as the Good Shepherd [Ezk. 34], He would gather them into one people

The time when He would send His Spirit to give them new life [Ezk. 37]

The time when He would free them from the hold of death [Is. 25]

The time when He would deal with their sins [Jer. 31, 50:20, Is 53]

The time when He would make creation new and remove from it all rebellion against His rule and all that harmed and hurt [Is. 11, 65; Hab. 2:14]

What we read in the gospels is not just the adventures of one particular individual human

It is the story of God coming to save, just as He has said He would, as John has declared from the beginning of the gospel [1:1-18]

And that is a salvation that embraces the whole creation, and all people, everywhere

Not just for a moment in time, but for all time, and the end of time

Not just patching up this present mess, not just dealing with this or that episode of injustice or sickness, intermittent interventions in people's lives

But the making of all things new

The goal of Jesus' coming is the new creation on the other side of judgement, when all rebellion is ended and the harm worked by the devil's lies consumed, when death itself is no more

When in Isaiah's words, spoken about 700 years before Jesus, every tear is wiped away from our eyes

*Isaiah 25: 7 On this mountain
he will swallow up the burial shroud,
the shroud over all the peoples,
the sheet covering all the nations.*

*⁸When he has swallowed up death once and for all,
the Lord God will wipe away the tears
from every face
and remove his people's disgrace
from the whole earth,
for the Lord has spoken.*

- Wiped away because their causes, death, pain, lies, and lovelessness – are gone for ever, and all things are made new

Jesus' resurrection and His return to the Father reveals that Jesus is God bringing the salvation of God that will encompass the whole creation.

Secondly, Jesus resurrection, in its reversal of the human judgement on Jesus and triumph over both death and injustice, confirms that He is the Christ, God's promised King whose triumph is the beginning and guarantee of the great promised salvation of God.

Whether Jesus was the King of the Jews or not was the issue focused on in Jesus' trial.

His crucifixion was the rejection by His own people of Jesus as God's promised King, the Christ, and the rejection by the Romans of the idea that Jesus being God's Christ mattered at all. King of the Jews or not he had no power to rival their power.

Jesus was Rejected, mocked, crucified as King of the Jews.

And God raising Him from the dead is God's reversal of that human judgement, His revealing that Jesus was His Christ, on the cross, in that weakness and humiliation, doing His work of saving His people.

God's Christ, His King, whose enemies would never succeed in dethroning Him, in disrupting His rule, for in His death, resurrection and ascension He had triumphed over death itself and the one who had the power of death, the devil, the one who had enslaved all our race with his lies

And as God's Christ, ascending to the Father, He has entered into His reign, with authority over all things, a reign which will culminate in all things, all His foes, death itself, being subjected to Him [Ps. 2, 110]

Jesus' resurrection and return to the Father, His glorification in the Father's presence, makes that day sure, and so guarantees the resurrection of all His people

It is the source of sure hope for those who believe in Him of the day when death will be no more, of the time when all tears will be ended.

The resurrection and return to the Father shows us who Jesus is.

What the risen Jesus does for those who believe in Him

And His resurrection and return to the Father is a source of present joy as well as sure hope because of what the risen and ascended Jesus does for those who believe in Him

Firstly HE brings forgiveness to those who believe in Him by believing the gospel the apostles are sent into the world to proclaim

²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you."²² After saying this, he breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. ²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Just as Jesus had been sent into the world to do the Father's will by speaking the Father's words and doing the works the Father had given him to do. [John 12:44-50, 14:6-11, 17:17-20]

his apostles are now sent into the world in the same way – to do Jesus' will by speaking Jesus' word and doing the works He gives them to do

And as they witness to Jesus in the power of the Spirit they administer the judgement of Jesus, not their own, through the message they bring

The message that there is forgiveness of sins to all who will believe in Him

Believe that His death for sin on the cross is God's provision to take away their sin, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world

John 1:²⁹ The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Here is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Believe that Jesus, lifted up on the cross as the sacrifice for sins, is the source of eternal life for all who will believe in Him [John 3:14-16, John 6:51]

Only here in John is the great blessing of believing in Jesus spoken of as forgiveness of sins.

Throughout John, and here in v. 31, it has been spoken of as life, eternal life

But what keeps us in death, excludes us from life, is our sin [John 8:24, 34-35]

Sin is Our refusal to believe God's word, to honour God with our trust and thanks, our determination to do what pleases us and not God, to put satisfying our own desires and appetites before loving God and doing what He says – whether that is seen in envy, anger, pride, lies or lust or other such things

All of us sin, and all of us are enslaved to death by our sin

Think again of Mary's tears, tears at the loss death brings, at the injustice and indifference that adds to our pain

The tragedy for us all is that just as we suffer wrong, we do wrong

Sinned against, we also sin against others

In our own lives in disobeying God we perpetuate the death we long to be free from

In our sin we are the source of our race's never ending tears

But the risen Jesus claims the right to give to His apostles, His messengers, the authority to declare our sins forgiven, forgiven to all who will believe His message

And notice how absolute His claim is

²³ If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Believing their witness to Jesus people are forgiven – not may be forgiven, not forgiven if they are good

Forgiven – their sins wiped from the record, never to be called to mind again forever

And if they retain sins, declare that those who do not believe in Jesus are still in their sin – those sins are there, still present to be judged

The judgement the apostles administer now on Jesus' authority, the authority of God, through the preaching of the gospel, is the judgement of the end

And that is great good news for those who believe the gospel

Jesus' forgiveness transforms our present

We no longer resent or fear God

We are instead adopted as His children and can throughout our lives rely on His love, the steadfast love of the one who rules over all things to achieve His good purposes for His people

And Jesus forgiveness makes our future sure.

Their will be no sin brought up on the last day to exclude us from God's kingdom, from the new heaven and earth

Secondly, the risen and ascended Jesus is the One who gives the Spirit who is the life of the Age to come, the never dying life, to all who believe in Him

In speaking of His ascending to the Father Jesus is picking up on something He had already spoken about with His apostles

The Lord Jesus on the night before He died said this was the great good of His going to the Father

John 16:⁷ Nevertheless, I am telling you the truth. It is for your benefit that I go away, because if I don't go away the Counselor will not come to you. If I go, I will send him to you. [John 14:16-17]

The Counsellor is the Holy Spirit, and throughout the gospel Jesus has spoken of the gift of the Spirit.

Remember Him talking with the Samaritan woman

John 4:¹⁴ But whoever drinks from the water that I will give him will never get thirsty again. In fact, the water I will give him will become a well of water springing up in him for eternal life."

The Spirit is the water the Lord Jesus gives, the source of new life now which will sustain us to eternal life

And He says the gift of the Spirit is for all who believe in Him

John 7:³⁸ The one who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, will have streams of living water flow from deep within him."³⁹ He said this about the Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus were going to receive the Spirit, for the Spirit had not yet been given because Jesus had not yet been glorified.

The risen, ascended Jesus gives the Spirit to all who believe in Him

Again a gift that transforms our present and makes our future sure

Even as we feel our own life in this world ebbing away, the Spirit is ever renewing life

Life in fellowship with God now

And the guarantee of our rising with Christ, for already in the Spirit we have the life of the new age

Present joy, sure hope – this is the gift of the glorified Jesus, of the crucified, risen, ascended Lord Jesus to all who believe in Him

Forgiven and given the Spirit now

And assured by those gifts of the risen Lord of sharing in the new heaven and earth His resurrection, the resurrection of the Son of God, makes certain,

Assured even now of sharing in the end of all tears

Life in His Name

Present joy and sure hope is for all who believe the testimony of John written in His gospel

His testimony to the crucified Jesus, that He is the Christ – God’s promised King, and He is the Son of God, sent from the Father to bring God’s salvation

John, remember, wants us to know that He writes to bring us all to believe and keep on believing in Jesus so that we would live, be given eternal life on Jesus’ authority

³⁰ Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. ³¹ But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

Do you have that life?

Let me talk Firstly, to those who are hearing this and know they do not yet believe in Jesus.

In fact you might be thinking

I have heard a heap of stuff I am not really sure about, don’t really understand

Jesus being the Son of God, or talk of the Christ, or even sin and forgiveness or a holy Spirit

There is a lot, but why would you expect any less

The story of Jesus is the story of the intersection of heaven and earth, of eternity with our transient lives, of the God, the Son of God, who has life in Himself becoming one of us – and dying

Story of us being undeservedly loved by one who is infinitely better and greater than us, and of a life and a hope that we can’t get anywhere else. It is big

And if you are hearing for the first time, or puzzled by what you hear

Start – by working out whether you can believe Mary and the apostles when they tell you Jesus has risen from the dead

It either did, or didn’t happen

Look at what they say

Consider whether the alternative explanations for their stated experience makes better sense

Ask questions

You can do that by reading a gospel on your own or with one of us

Or coming along to Christianity explored

Or talking with me or a Christian you know today

Because it matters, for the resurrection of Jesus is

much more than a lucky escape for one man

more than a consolation to His followers at that time

It means Jesus can give you what no one else can

The forgiveness of God

The life of the Spirit of God

A sure hope of sharing in that time when there will be no more bitter tears for death and injustice will be no more

And what other hope will you have, what comfort will be yours when the tears come, as they will

But there may also be some of you here today who are hearing the living Lord Jesus calling you to embrace the life and hope He gives to all who trust Him

He has come into focus for you as you have listened as the one who has triumphed over death by His death

Who lives now with power and authority to keep His promises to you.

Like Mary, turn to Him

Confess your belief by asking Him for the life He promises, for forgiveness and the gift of the Spirit

He knows your name, and you can call on His

IF you don't know what to say you could say something like this

“Risen Lord Jesus, I believe you are God's King and my Lord. Forgive me my sin and give me your Spirit as you promise to all who believe in you.”

He will hear that prayer

And then talk to a Christian you know, or one of the ministry team

For it will all be new, and new people need help

And Finally I want to talk to those of you, most of you, who are believers

Did you hear what Jesus said to Thomas

John 20:29 Jesus said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”

Jesus is saying that we are blessed in believing without seeing the risen Lord

And we are, for These things, forgiveness, the Spirit, our sure hope of sharing in the day when death will be no more and every tear is wiped from our eyes, are ours no matter what our present circumstances

Well or sick

Prosperous or poor

Whether we are culturally dominant or marginalised, enjoy freedom or experience persecution

Ours even as we know tears of loss and grief, of powerlessness in the face of human injustice in this life

Ours because they are the promises to us of the risen Jesus who has ascended to the Father

And these gifts of the glorified Jesus change our present experience

Walking by faith, and not by sight, we know

Our loss here is not final

The Injustice we experience is not the last word

That sickness or poverty or cultural marginalisation do not define us, or determine the value of our lives

For Jesus has risen

The Son of God bringing the salvation of God

The Christ who has triumphed

And life is ours now and forever believing that HE is the Christ, the Son of God