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John 20:1–18

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# SEEING HEAVEN THROUGH TEARS

*EASTER SUNDAY*

Emily was explaining to our 8-year-old grandson the meaning of Easter. For most Christians, the resurrection means that our sins have been forgiven and gives us the certain hope that we will go to heaven when we die. Now Wesley is all boy and I could tell he wasn't going to be very excited if the resurrection just meant going to be with God in heaven when you die. So he asked Emily, What is heaven like? His question brought me back to my childhood thoughts of heaven.

I was 6 years old in 1957 when my family took our last vacation together, on the Hawaiian island of Oahu. Waikiki Beach had just two hotels back then, and my parents and older sisters and I spent two wonderful weeks playing in the water and being together as a family. My father was a surgeon, who worked long hours and was seldom available at home, but for those two weeks in Hawaii he was fully present, without distractions. He had broken his wrist just before we left home, so he was in a cast and couldn't take me swimming or surfing, but he put me in the care of Eddie the beach boy – all man – and I surfed on his shoulders while my dad paddled an outrigger canoe next to us and captured the adventure on film.

Ever since that trip, if you asked me what heaven was like, I'd say it was Hawaii – the weather and the water and my dad.

My wife, Emily, had a different vision of heaven when she was a little girl. For her, heaven was located in left field at Dodger Stadium, because that was the one place she and her dad bonded. He was a quiet man – a medical librarian – who for the most part didn't know how to communicate with Emily, but watching the Dodgers play, he would sit and smoke a cigar and teach her to keep score. The baseball field was like the Garden of Eden, where you are safe and everything is black and white with no shades of grey. Everything is ordered and beautiful, and if you come to our home today that's what you'll find. That's Emily's childhood vision of heaven – Dodger Stadium, a scorecard and her dad.

Where do these longings come from? The answer is that we all have longings of what "ought" to be, because we have a racial memory of our first parents who lived in a garden, in Eden. In the opening chapters of Genesis, God is depicted as a gardener with his hands in soil planting a garden in Eden, and there he places the man (Adam), inviting him to enjoy the rich banqueting table of creation's fertility and beauty. It is a place of intimacy, where God walks alongside the man to teach him, like a father to a son. It is a place where love and trust binds two people into one, as man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, becoming one flesh. The covenantal commitment creates absolute vulnerability, nakedness with no shame. It is a place of dreams and longings, where heaven unites with earth.

And this was Israel's great hope for the future of the world. If you had announced to a first century Jew that the resurrection just meant that by faith in Jesus, they would go to heaven when they died, they would have responded, "That's it? What a letdown!" That message would not have ignited Israel's prophetic hopes, taken the first century world by storm, or empowered Jesus' disciples to fearlessly proclaim the good news in a hostile world and joyfully go to their martyrdom. Resurrection meant much more to the Jews of the first century. Israel's hope was not found in going to heaven when they died, but in the return of Israel's God to Zion and the establishment of his heavenly rule on earth. Tom Wright summarizes Israel's hope in his book *Surprised by Hope*:

Faced with his beautiful and powerful creation in rebellion, God longed to set it right, to rescue it from continuing corruption and impending chaos and to bring it back into order and fruitfulness. God longed, in other words, to reestablish His wise sovereignty over the whole creation, which would mean a great act of healing and rescue. He did not want to rescue humans *from* creation any more than he wanted to rescue Israel *from* the Gentiles. He wanted to rescue Israel *in order that Israel might be a light to the Gentiles*, and he wanted thereby to rescue humans *in order that humans might be his rescuing stewards over creation*. That is the inner dynamic of the kingdom of God.<sup>1</sup>

From Israel's point of view, when God returned to Zion to set up his worldwide kingdom, this would usher in the end of history, and with it, the resurrection that would open the door to a new age in which heaven and earth would be fully integrated. God's people are not raised to be disembodied souls playing harps in the sky, but to inhabit real bodies that work and sing and play.

Now the great surprise of the first century was that God did in the middle of history with Jesus what the Jews were expecting to occur at the end of history. Not only was Jesus raised from the dead, he has been exalted in the presence of God, seated at his right hand, and is currently ruling the world as God's King—"as a human being, fulfilling the destiny marked out for the human race from the sixth day of creation."<sup>2</sup> So to say "Christ is risen," means the work of redemption is finished and the new age has arrived. This is why the early Christians changed their day of worship from the Sabbath, or seventh day, to Sunday, the eighth day—the very first day of God's New Creation.

From the New Testament viewpoint, the present age and the age to come overlap. And those who give their allegiance to the risen King receive not just the gift of forgiveness but also the Holy Spirit, who infuses that surging life and vitality of the age to come into their bodies now.

If all these notions are new to you and difficult for you to swallow in one gulp, allow me to shut off the fire hose and go back to the very beginning, to the place where it all began: a garden tomb outside the city walls of Jerusalem. Today I would like to invite you to use your imagination as we view the amazing drama from the vantage point of the very first disciple who encountered the risen Lord, Mary Magdalene.

### Mary Magdalene's Story

Mary Magdalene is one of the most prominent of the Galilean women to have followed Jesus. She is differentiated from a number of other Mary's by her hometown, Magdala, which is generally identified as a fishing town about a mile north of Tiberius on the Sea of Galilee. Though the gospel writers don't give us the details of her first encounter with Jesus, her devotion became exemplary, no doubt because of what Jesus did for her. Luke tells us that she was among a group of "women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out" (Luke 8:2 ESV). The number seven is symbolic of perfection and suggests that her former life was characterized by complete subjection to the terrible, tortuous tyranny of the devil. In appreciation for the miracle of her new life, she generously gave of her own resources to provide for Jesus and the twelve in order that the cleansing, saving life of God's kingdom might be freely given to others.

Her devotion was further adorned by her courage. She led a group of women from Galilee to Jerusalem to be with Jesus during the dangerous days of Passover. When the universe turned dark and evil unleashed its relentless fury on Jesus, all his disciples fled in fear – that is, all but this small band of women, among whom Mary Magdalene was preeminent (Mark always cites her first in the list, 15:40, 47; 16:1).

Public mourning for crucified "criminals" was not allowed under Roman law. But Mary would not be deterred. Her devotion to Jesus inspired her female compatriots to stand their ground against the savage brutality of Rome and to worship and grieve for their king "at a distance" (Mark 15:47), while he was being crucified.

After the Romans crucified their victims, they would take their bodies and throw them into a common grave for criminals. Had the Romans had their way, Jesus' body would have been flung into a common pit with the other two criminals. But in Jesus' case, Joseph of Arimathea, a secret follower of Jesus and wealthy member of the Sanhedrin, intervened and with the help of Nicodemus rescued his body from desecration and gave Jesus a burial fit for a king. They wrapped his body in strips of linen and seventy-five pounds of spices and laid it in a new tomb that Joseph had cut out of the rock. When they laid Jesus's body in the cave, Mary Magdalene was present to witness the event, sitting opposite the tomb, until it was sealed in stone.

Piecing together the gospel accounts, I get the impression that Mary Magdalene was more *faithfully present* with Jesus throughout his journey to the cross and beyond, than any other disciple (John may be the exception). Given her devotion, it shouldn't surprise us that after endless weeping and sleepless Sabbath nights, she would be back at the tomb before the light of day.

### The Tomb is Empty!<sup>3</sup>

**Now on the first day of the week Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So 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." (John 20:1-2 ESV)**

Mary came with more spices to adorn Jesus' body, to worship and to grieve, for "there was nowhere else to be, nothing else to do, nothing else mattered, that would ever matter."<sup>4</sup> Arriving on the scene, she sees that the stone has been rolled away. Grave robbers – it can't be! Like salt on an open wound, it's another twist of the knife. Someone has taken him away, but who? She must find out, there is no time to spare. She runs back into the city, through the streets to where Peter and John are hiding.

### Linen Cloths Left Behind

So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb. Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. And stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth, which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths but folded up (lit. "rolled up") in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the Scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes. (vv. 3-10)

Hearing the news, they take off in tandem, running like the wind, but the younger wins the race and arrives at the tomb first. A bit reluctant to rush into sacred territory, he "stoops over to look in" and seeing the grave clothes from a distance probably concluded the body was still there. Peter, who arrives a few moments later has no such inhibitions. With no hesitation, or beating about the bush, he just brushes past John and in he goes. What he sees confirms Mary's witness, but there is something even more mysterious. The linen cloths are still there, carefully arranged like a polite houseguest who makes his bed and neatly arranges the pillows before departing. And the facecloth that had been on his head, is not lying with the linen clothes, but rolled up by itself, retaining the shape and contour of Jesus' head.

Someone, having unwrapped the body (a complicated task in itself) has gone to the trouble of laying out the cloths to create an effect. It looks as though the body wasn't picked up and unwrapped, but had just disappeared, leaving the empty cloths, like a collapsed balloon when the air has gone out of it."<sup>5</sup>

Following Peter's lead, John finally summoned enough courage to enter the tomb, and seeing the grave clothes lying there as if a body was still in them caused him to believe, though the full significance of the Scriptures was not yet clear to him or the other disciples. Puzzled and amazed, they returned to their hiding place in Jerusalem. But Mary would not, could not leave.

## Seeing through Tears

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb. 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. (vv. 11-14)

Overcome with grief she weeps a world of grief, inconsolable grief. John’s description invites us in to touch her tears, as Mary acts out one of the oldest dramas in the world. John is inviting us to stand with her as she weeps, “or to think of someone you know who has cried bitterly recently. Bring them with you and stand there with Mary outside the tomb. Listen to their voice. And then, the moment is right, stoop down and look into the tomb itself. Be prepared for a surprise.”<sup>6</sup>

What does she see? Angels! Where did they come from? Why didn’t Peter and John see them (the same verb is used “stood down and look”)? Mary has a lens that allows her to see through this world to the next – and that lens is her tears.

As a pastor it took me years before I was brave enough to walk into grief and look death in the eye. I’ve always had a fear of death, but as a pastor I have to go where death is and stand with people when they weep and when they face tragedy. On one occasion I had to go to Stanford Hospital to be with a couple and their six year-old son as he lay dying. I didn’t want to go, but I went in obedience to the tomb, to see what I did not want to see. In the hours prior to this precious boy’s death, I watched his parents worship God through their tears. In the midst of the tears we sang together the first verse of, *It Is Well With My Soul*, but I didn’t know the second verse. Then, one of the nurses who had attended the boy was with us in the room, and she began to sing the second verse from memory, and as she did, angels came into the room and everyone felt their presence, and a peace that surpassed comprehension flooded the room and took away the sting of death. It was incredible. As Tom Wright suggests,

Maybe sometimes you can only see angels through tears. When people are afraid, angels tend to tell them not to be. When people are in tears, angels ask why. Say it out loud. Whoever you’ve brought with you to stand here, listen to them say it too. They have taken away...my home, my husband, my children, my rights, my dignity, my hopes, my life. They have taken away my master. The world’s grief, Israel’s grief, concentrated in Mary’s grief.<sup>7</sup>

After Adam and Eve sinned, it was God who came looking for the man and woman who were hiding from God among the trees in the garden. Following their judgment the man and the woman were driven out of the garden, and angels were placed as sentries to guard the way to the tree of life. Centuries later the prophet Jeremiah ignited Israel’s hope that one day, everything would be reversed, as God would recreate the heart of the wayward nation:

**How long will you wander,  
unfaithful Daughter Israel?  
The LORD will create a new thing on earth—**

**the woman will return to the man.” (Jer 31:22 TNIV)**  
(or “a woman will encompass a man.” NASB)

Now on the first day of the New Creation, it is a woman who runs to the tomb seeking her Lord. And through her tears she sees angels, who open the gateway to the tree of life.

## The Risen Lord!

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). (vv. 15-16)

Turning around she sees Jesus, and mistaking him for the gardener, she pleads with him to tell her where he laid him, so she can take him away. Actually this strange figure is a gardener, but on a whole different plane. He is the new Adam, “charged with bringing the chaos of God’s creation into new order, into flower, into fruitfulness. He has come to uproot the thorns and thistles and replace them with blossoms and harvests.”<sup>8</sup>

And then it happens: she hears her name, “Mary!” Don’t you know me? Of course you do; but no you don’t. I am resurrected and alive and everything is new, like a refreshing blue sky after a stormy night. Recognizing Jesus’ voice, Mary is so overwhelmed with relief that she embraces Jesus like a mother would a lost child. The treasured intimacy that she lost is renewed, but Jesus gently instructs that it will be different.

## A New Relationship

Jesus said to her, “Stop clinging 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.’” (v. 17)

Jesus’ words do not imply that he didn’t want Mary not to touch his resurrection body, since later he invites Thomas to place his hands into his wounds. But rather, it is more likely that he is saying that their relationship will take on a new and higher dimension of reality. Things won’t be as they once were, with Jesus walking their streets teaching his disciples about his relationship with the Father. Soon he will take the throne of his Father in heaven, and from there he will exert his rule on earth. And when that happens, the intimate relationship he has with the Father will be open to all. As Tom Wright observes,

Up until this point Jesus has spoken about God ‘the Father’ or ‘the Father who sent me,’ or ‘my Father.’ He has called his followers ‘disciples,’ ‘servants’ and ‘friends.’ Now all that has changed. Feel the force of v. 17: ‘I am ascending to *my* Father and *your* Father, to *my* God and *your* God.’<sup>9</sup>

A new relationship has sprung to life like a sudden spring flower. The disciples are welcomed into a new world where they can know God the way Jesus knows God, where they can be intimate children with their Father. It’s a dream come true for a little girl who sat next to her father keeping score at Dodger stadium, and the boy whose father took pictures of him surfing on a beach boy’s shoulders in Hawaii. It’s a new world where

every longing is fulfilled, where heaven permeates every inch of earth.

### An Apostle to the Apostles

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”—and that he had said these things to her. (v. 18)

In obedience to her Lord’s command, Mary went to the apostles and announced the good news of God’s new world breaking into history. In a patriarchal world that would not accept a woman’s testimony in court, something new breaks forth – Mary Magdalene becomes the first eyewitness to the resurrection and God’s new Creation, an apostle to the apostles.

Given the radical nature of God’s new world, it shouldn’t surprise us that women are often the ones initiating new things in the kingdom and inspiring men to take the high ground as servant-leaders. But for the disciples, Mary’s vision of the risen Christ was more than they could comprehend. When Mary shared the news with them, Luke tells us that her “words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11). It took another resurrection appearance for them to believe her witness. The question for us today is whether we will emulate Mary’s devotion, accept her testimony, and embrace with her the present reality of a New Creation inaugurated at the foot of a blood-stained cross and the doorway to an empty tomb.

May we never be afraid of our tears.

1 N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope, Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 202.

2 N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Easter* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 24.

3 I have heavily depended on Tom Wright’s work for my insights on Mary Magdalene, N. T. Wright, *John for Everyone, Part Two, Chapters 11-21* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 144-147.

4 Wright, *John for Everyone*, 140.

5 Wright, *John for Everyone*, 141.

6 Wright, *John for Everyone*, 145.

7 Wright, *John for Everyone*, 146.

8 Wright, *John for Everyone*, 146.

9 Wright, *John for Everyone*, 145.

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