
The Easter Gift of Tears

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Easter Sunday

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

I remember this beautiful morning a dear and elderly man named Carl. Carl was a faithful and simple man, and he loyally attended the church I served. When I visited him from time to time, he would prepare a fine lunch and then treat me to beautiful classical music on a stereo system that he was so proud of. Other than fine food and music, he had little else; he was a simple and elegant man, fully alive.

But he wept. When he told me stories of his past, he would weep. When he mentioned his children, he would cry. He had lost one child, which was quite sad, but his other stories were not necessarily sad at all. They were just true and honest stories about his life that simply caused him to weep, with sincerity.

Inevitably, he would apologize to me. "Oh, I'm so sorry," he would say. "Here I go crying again." He was embarrassed by his tears.

I was, too, at first. But then I grew to look forward to those tears. I knew he would cry whenever I spoke with him, and he would say, "Don't these tears bother you?"

"No," I learned to reply, "I come here because you have a gift. You have the gift of tears."

Mary Magdalene, in the Christian gospels, had this gift. After her friends Peter and John and raced to the grave that first Easter morning, she simply stood by the empty tomb, crying. We think she was crying because she was sad. After all, she said, "They have taken my Lord away, and I do not know where they have taken him."

But those tears meant more than sadness. Those tears meant that Mary was actually in touch, in touch at that point with emptiness. They were actually tears of faith and love and purity; they meant she was fully alive. When we can cry in the world, we are in touch with God's glory in a most intimate way. Like Mary, we just might not know it at the moment.

Mary knew she was empty. Mary knew she was looking for Jesus, but Jesus was behind her. She thought he was just the gardener. Then, the "gardener" spoke intimately to her; he said her name, "Mary," and Mary knew immediately that it was her Lord. When we cry, God speaks to us by name.

There may be some folks who are crying this morning. There may be some folks who have cried hard this year. A loved one has died. You lost your job. Maybe you lost your identity.

Those tears are signs. They are not signs of sadness. Rather, tears are indications that you are alive, fully alive.

There is a gift of tears in this life. It is the gift of purity and vulnerability. In classical spiritual literature, the early Christian monastic mothers and desert fathers knew of this gift. The gift of tears.

Here in Atlanta, especially, around Easter time, many of us know the gift of tears. But we don't tend to think of it as a gift. We think of it as pollen in the air! I think it is because God wants us to cry that God gives Atlanta the gift of pollen!

In Atlanta, we know that there are no blossoms without tears. We love the blooming flowers and exhilarating greenery, but we also know that we are sneezing and crying daily. There are no blossoms without tears. We even bring sprawling lilies into the church at Easter so we can be closer to the pollen!

Mary Magdalene stood by the tomb, in tears.

Tears are an integral part of the Christian gospel. They are signs that we take life seriously, that we comprehend what suffering and loss are, that we feel the pain of death, and then, then, we know the soaring freedom of new life. Tears of joy emerge when what was lost is found! This is the Christian gospel. Weeping may endure for the night, but joy, joy comes in the morning. We cry. But then we laugh.

There is another, so-called "alternative," gospel going around these days. We have heard that the long lost Gospel of Judas has been found. It joins a long list of lesser "gospels," the Gospel of Thomas, and even the Gospel of Mary.

Do not be dismayed by these other gospels, the gospel of Mary, or the gospel of Judas. I know you've read about them lately. The type of people who read about these new gospels are also the kind of inquiring people who attend this church.

The claim in the Gospel of Judas is that Judas and Jesus made a secret agreement, such that Judas would be the one who helped deliver Jesus out of the body. The claim is that the material body is bad. The claim is that Judas is not the betrayer; rather he helped Jesus get rid of his material body so that Jesus could be released into the spirit world.

But, friends, that is not a new heresy, or even a new gospel. St. Irenaeus knew about the Gospel of Judas way back in the year 180 A.D., and he knew it was false. Irenaeus would claim, contrary to Judas, that the "glory of God is a human being, fully alive!"

The Christian gospel honors the body, honors the entire body. The meaning of the incarnation is that God honors flesh. God honors our humanity, in Jesus Christ. Tears are real. Suffering is real. Only when tears and suffering and death are real, quite real, is the Resurrection is also real. The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

This is why Mary stands by the empty tomb with tears.

Ultimately, tears are a sign that we are close to God. Even emptiness is a sign that we are close to God.

These tears are like pollen. They contain seeds of new life!

About a year ago, another man I know died. He was known to his children as a tough and obsessed man. He rarely, if ever, had shown an emotional life to his children. He was all work and all business.

But as he lay dying that day, a year ago, he looked up at his daughter. She saw, all of a sudden, an enormous tear well up in his eye and then slide down his face. It was one tear drop, that's all, but it was the biggest tear the daughter had ever seen.

It was enough. The daughter knew that her father was real, that he was vulnerable, and that he could now die in peace. He did.

We had a graveside service. He was buried next to a tremendous, flowering azalea bush, and there were tall pine trees and lovely oaks swaying in that spring breeze. I looked up, and I saw a single, solitary, butterfly fluttering above the coffin.

That butterfly was the man's tear. That tear, which was a gift of emptiness and vulnerability, had been transformed. And

then, it was a butterfly, and a sign of new life and resurrection. The glory of God is a human being fully alive.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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