*Mary's Tears - an Easter Meditation*

**Weep?!**

**I could have shed buckets full,**

**there in the garden**

**all alone.**

**I don't know, really, what I went looking for.**

**I had to get away.**

**I didn't want to be with anyone**

**- only him -**

**and that was impossible.**

**In the mist of the early morning**

**I sought out that strange comfort**

**of just being near him.**

**Perhaps I would talk to him**

**- or, at least, to his grave.**

**Maybe he would hear me**

**for he,**

**unlike so many,**

**had truly heard me before.**

**Either way,**

**I could talk**

**and weep out the pain of my heart.**

**And yet even that was stolen from me.**

**Vandals!**

**Thieves!**

**How dare they?**

**How could they do this to him?**

**.... to me?**

**Stunned beyond hatred**

**the questions flooded out with the tears:**

**Why?**

**Why?**

**WHY?**

**And, at a voice,**

**"Sir,**

**if you know,**

**tell me what they have done to him!"**

**There was something in that voice**

**that broke through my hysteria:**

**a quieting peace**

**as I heard him call my name.**

**As the veil of tears lifted,**

**and my eyes could at last focus on his face**

**- that sight**

**I just could not believe.**

**But, yes...YES!**

**I grabbed him.**

**I hugged him.**

**And laugh? I nearly cried!**

*Nick Stanyon. Easter 1991*

**Sermon preached at Dursley**

Easter day 2023

John 20: 1-18

*Laugh -I could have cried!*

There’s an art to making people laugh. ‘It’s the way you tell them’ the comic will say. But it was not a good joke that turned Mary’s tears to laughter - just one simple word.

Those of us who read the Bible publicly (and perhaps more importantly those of us who have to listen to them!) will know that there is quite an art to reading the Bible well.

As in comedy, timing is important here too. Knowing where to pause effectively adds a great deal of life to the reading, just as bad pausing can lead to hilarious misunderstandings. Such as the day I could not believe it when I heard it read: *And Jesus told Peter to push off ..... (*Only after a very long and inappropriate pause, did the reader add the rest of the verse: *a little from the shore*!)

So timing is important, and so is pronunciation (Oh no! He’s given me a passage with all those difficult names!).

Subtle changes in volume and pitch of the voice reveal a real master of the art.

But most important, perhaps, is emphasis. Preachers love emphasis. With changing emphasis, you can make a simple sentence into a sermon!

He is not here, he is risen

Now before you think I’ve brought you out here for an early morning public speaking lesson, let’s get back to the point shall we?

The trouble with the written word of the Bible text as we know it, is that it does not come with any annotation, telling us how to pronounce, when to pause and what emphasis to give in each sentence. We have to work that all out for ourselves.

Yet one word we *are* interested in today. How should it be read, what emphasis should we give it? That one word is “Mary!”

Now, I think some of us have been raised on the Cecil B. Demille Silver Screen School of Interpretation, where all actors have visited the taxidermist as well as makeup before coming in front of the camera - so stiff and lifeless they are in their false sense of reverence!

All the reality, all the humanity, and I would say all the meaning is lost if we read it that way.

What we need, I would suggest, is something much more animated. Animated, and assertive, with a full dose of compassion, a touch of exasperation and a big, big smile! That would just about do it! So lets have a try:

And Jesus replied: Mary!

Do you get it? Do you feel it?

Mary hadn’t until then, had she? She couldn’t see the truth that was staring her in the face, so weighed down by heaviness, doubt and grief. The angels had probably infuriated her as they giggled, asking all their daft questions - but they could see what she couldn’t see - who it was that stood right behind her! Even when Jesus himself spoke to her, Mary didn’t catch on, did she? The whole event was turning into a regular pantomime!

But it wasn’t funny for Mary. It’s not funny for us when we come looking for Jesus and cannot for the life of us find him. When, weighed down by our own burdens, we grieve his absence.

The thing is, he is not absent, is he?

In my most montypythonesque moments, I should think the reason the angels disappear from the scene so quickly here, is that they have to fly off in a hurry to save themselves bursting out in laughter and shouting out: He’s behind you!

That would be to steal the punch line, which rightly belongs to Jesus. His word on this Easter Morning is one that is charged with challenge and meaning; do we grieve his absence as he stands right here beside us?

“Mary!”

That is his word for Easter.

Only this morning he uses *your* name.

He is calling you to wake up to his risen presence.

He is calling you to new realisation, to new vision, to new hope, new faith, new joy, new life.

“Mary!” he says

“Mary!

I am risen and I am here!”

Have you heard his word for you today?

And if you have, have you let it soak in and make a difference where it really counts?

**A song**

Now, for a number of years I've been trying to write an Easter Musical. I've got a few songs in the bag, but then I got stuck. That’s because every time I get to this point in the story I hear Mary Magdalene bursting into this song:

Birds flying high
You know how I feel
Sun in the sky
You know how I feel
Breeze driftin' on by
You know how I feel

It's a new dawn
It's a new day
It's a new life
For me
And I'm feeling good
I'm feeling good

Unfortunately, I think I’d be done for copyright infringement if I did include it. Songwriters Anthony Newley / Leslie Bricusse got there first.

But, think about it, whether performed by Nina Simone or Michael Buble’ – how great a musical expression is that of what easter, can and should mean to us?

What an Easter Anthem it is! A song about resurrection, about new life and new hope - as Mary found in Christ, our risen Saviour!

**A word: Respair**

There is a word that describes how Mary was feeling that morning – a word that describes what Easter can mean for all of us. It’s a largely forgotten English word, and you may not have heard it, but it is very much the word for today.

Normally I don’t go in for big or obscure words in my preaching, and I really hate it if I’m reading a novel or listening to a sermon when I have to make a grab for the dictionary every few sentences! But I think you’ll like this one. Well – I do.

I discovered this long-lost English word a couple of weeks ago when on retreat down at Sheldon, in Devon. Prior to that retreat, the word that had dominated my life and experience, indeed all our lives and experience over the past few years, was the Collins dictionary Word of the Year 2022: *Permacrisis!*

I went to that retreat in a turmoil of yet another crisis, not knowing till the day before that I was going to be able to make it. To be honest I wasn’t sure I was going to cope with all the silence, having to listen the racing thoughts in my head. Maybe I felt a bit like Mary might have done, when she found her way to the tomb that first Easter Sunday. She’d been through so much, seen so many dreams shattered, watched her loved-one suffer powerless to do anything to help, seen him die and all her hope with him. How cruel it all was. How soul destroying.

Maybe you have been there, done that. That’s just where I was, when the retreat leader started his sessions on ‘lost words in the wilderness’ by telling us of a conversation he had had with Suzi Dent – the expert on words and their origins (etymologist) and dictionary boffin on TV’s Countdown.

You may have read her articles in papers or online, but post-pandemic, Suzi has been on a campaign to bring this 15th century word (and other words) back into use. She’s noticed a trend in our use of words. How over the years we have tended to keep the negative, but allow the positive form of the word slip away in to misuse (miserable and pessimistic lot that we are!). for instance, she notes that most of us are familiar with the word ‘unkempt’ (meaning scruffy) but few of us have ever heard of us used the positive word ‘kempt’ without the un. That means well presented, smart and tidy). Even our language tends to emphasise the critical, negative slant of our collective British psyche!

So, the word that Suzi has appointed herself to bring back into use is this one: RESPAIR.

No, not DESPAIR – we all know too much about that one –

RESPAIR.

It’s the opposite. It means ‘to find new hope, to recover from despair’

What an important word!

And if that is not what Mary experienced at the point when Jesus said her name, calling her out of her darkness to see that Yes, the impossible had happened, Jesus was alive again, death has been conquered…then I don’t know what is!

RESPAIR

Respair – finding new hope, recovering from despair.

I think I am with Suzi Dent, in that we should recover this word and start using it all the more.

But more than the word, it’s the reality we need.

It’s the reality that Easter Sunday, perhaps better called Resurrection Sunday or even Respair Sunday, is all about.

That moment when we hear Jesus calling our name, and everything changes, a whole new day dawns not just for us as individuals, but for the whole world.

**A poem.**

The song I mentioned earlier really does express the hope, the joy, the respair that each of us can enter into when Christ comes calling our name at Easter. Today we should be ‘feeling good’, shouldn’t we.

But it goes beyond a purely personal experience, when it recognises that the bird in the sky, the fish in the sea, and the whole creation is somehow caught up in the newness. Easter brings new life and new hope for the world. And we who know it for ourselves, are meant to go and share it widely, joining ourselves to the work of God, who makes all things new!

I want to end with a poem that I believe takes the full scope of this resurrection and respair and celebrates it not only on a personal level, but in a far reaching cosmic one.

Because He is risen
Spring is possible
In all the cold hard places
Gripped by winter
And freedom jumps the queue
To take fear’s place
as our focus
Because He is risen

Because He is risen
My future is an epic novel
Where once it was a mere short story
My contract on life is renewed in perpetuity
My options are open-ended
My travel plans are cosmic
Because He is risen

Because He is risen
Healing is on order and assured
And every disability will bow
Before the endless dance of his ability
And my grave too will open
When my life is restored
For this frail and fragile body
Will not be the final word
on my condition
Because He is risen

Because He is risen
Hunger will go begging in the streets
For want of a home
And selfishness will have a shortened shelf-life
And we will throng to the funeral of famine
And dance on the callous grave of war
And poverty will be history
In our history
Because He is risen

And because He is risen
A fire burns in my bones
And my eyes see possibilities
And my heart hears hope
Like a whisper on the wind
And the song that rises in me
Will not be silenced
As life disrupts
This shadowed place of death
Like a butterfly under the skin
And death itself
Runs terrified to hide
Because He is risen

[Gerard Kelly](http://bless.typepad.com/spoken_worship/2006/01/because_he_is_r.html)