

WHY ARE YOU CRYING?

(John 20.11-18 and Revelation 21.1-5)

Introduction

One of the peculiarities of being human is that we cry. To weep is to be human. According to recent YouGov research, 66% of men and 93% of women say they have cried in the last year. Almost one in five women and one in twenty men say they cry at least once a week. Whether that shows that women have a harder time of it or that they just find it unhelpful to bottle things up I don't really know.

Machines don't cry. I don't think they'll ever make a computer that gets emotional when I make a mistake at the keyboard or forget to save my work and lose it all. My mobile phone won't get the tissues out when I leave it at home by mistake.

Animals don't cry either. All animals have tear ducts to lubricate their eyes but, with the possible exception of elephants, no animal ever sheds tears of emotion. Crocodiles do actually produce tears but never when they're sad; they only cry when they eat their victims.

Plants don't cry. Although research done recently at the Institute for Applied Physics in the University of Bonn in Germany suggests that plants might possibly emit a gas when they're being cut or pressed – and that is supposed to be equivalent to shedding tears. I just hope this "vital work" isn't being funded by the ever generous taxpayer.

But we cry because we're human. It's part of our makeup in this fallen world and seems to be unique to our species. The Psalms speak of the world as the Valley of Baka, a dale of bitter tears, flooded with a river of pain and loss. Our tear ducts are wired to the centre in our brain that commands the emotions and we weep when we experience pain, when we feel lonely, when we share the burden of someone else's sorrow and most of all when we go through loss and grief ourselves.

I have wept many times before and since but I have never cried with the same intensity, with the same force, that I did when we lost twins through miscarriage back in the 1990s. Grief touches us all and when it does what can we do but weep at the graveside?

Mary Magdalene

So it's completely understandable that when we find Mary Magdalene at the empty tomb on Easter morning, she's in tears. She's gone at first light to wash Jesus' body, hastily buried the previous Friday, and embalm it with spices. It's her last act of devotion for this man.

But when she gets to the grave she finds that the stone has been rolled away, and the body is gone. The grave has been disturbed and the emotion of the weekend gets the better of her; she can't even have any closure and she just wells up and loses it right there.

She's got tears running down her cheeks. She feels wretched. All she's got are unanswered questions. Who's taken the body? Where is it? Why has it been moved? What's going on? Somebody give me some answers!

She looks into the tomb again and two figures dressed in white are there. "Woman, why are you crying?" they say.

It's pretty obvious why she's crying. She's been sobbing for three days and now it's getting worse. Her eyes are wet and weary from constant crying. "They have taken my Lord away" she says "and I don't know where they have put him."

CS Lewis wrote a poem in the season of grief after his wife died called "Love as Warm as Tears." This is why Mary was crying; she *loved* him. He was unique to her. He was special and now he was gone. Like that distraught widow who broke out of the lines and ran over to one of the hearses driving towards the church in Wootton Bassett to kiss the window with her tears, Mary just wanted to show one last gesture of respect and affection.

Why did she love Jesus so much? Ancient tradition says she had been a prostitute. She is sometimes identified with an unnamed woman who had lived a sinful life in Mark's Gospel who poured perfume on Jesus' feet. And Magdala was a kind of red light village. To have Magdalene attached to your name was to identify you as a woman of loose living. It was a kind of euphemism.

Luke's gospel tells us that Jesus delivered her of seven demons. To have one was a living nightmare – she had seven of them. Just think of the oppression, the attrition, the heaviness, the shadows, the torment, the constant harassment that she lived with... We don't need to know what the demons were or how she got

them. All we need to know is that when she met Jesus, she was healed and the living nightmare of her past was gone with a word of command from his mouth.

Her body and her mind and her soul were free. She felt new again. She was forgiven everything. Her record was wiped clean.

No wonder she loved him! This was the only man who had ever treated her with dignity. No wonder she stayed to the very end at the cross and no wonder she was first to arrive at the tomb.

The utter devastation of losing the closest person in your life does not compare with any other human experience. If that has happened to you, you know what I mean. That's what happened to Mary Magdalen on the first Good Friday.

She turns round and who is standing there behind her but Jesus? The last person she is expecting to see alive is Jesus. She doesn't recognise him. Why not? Because the last time she saw him, his body was lacerated and covered in blood. His head was crowned in thorns. She watched him die. She witnessed the spear piercing his side. She looked on as they took his limp and lifeless body down from the cross. She watched as they laid him in the tomb and covered him from head to toe with a muslin burial cloth.

She'd been there as her dreams died with the only man who never abused her, never mistreated her.

Shortly after his wife died, the poet Edgar Allan Poe took a pen and scribbled down a couple of lines – it was his shortest poem and many think his most powerful. It reads, "Deep in earth my love is lying - And I must weep alone."

That's why Mary Magdalen was crying. Deep in earth her love is lying and she's weeping all alone."

Jesus asks the same question as the angels had asked before. "Why are you crying? Who is it you're looking for?" "Sir," she says, "if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." She thinks he's the gardener.

And then with one word, her world is remade. "Mary."

For we who grieve, the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. It means that everything he said; his promises, his warnings, his commands and what he said about death are absolutely trustworthy.

- He said he was going up to Jerusalem and he went.
- He said he would be mocked, beaten, spat on and handed over and he was.
- He said they would crucify him and they did.
- He said after three days he would rise again and up from the grave he rose.

"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die." You can count on it.

In this fallen world we cry. There are tears running down children's faces as they flee carnage in Syria. There are tears running down mothers' faces as they grieve another day without their kidnapped schoolgirls in Nigeria. There are tears of loss, tears of rage, at every funeral. What a miserable world this is. What a mess we're in.

But in the very last book of the Bible, looking forward to when the Lord returns to judge the living and the dead, it says "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

"Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed."

Let us pray.