

Sermon for Sunday, April 18, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"LIVING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF EASTER"
St. John 20:1-18

Text: "Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?'"
--St. John 20:15a

One of the saddest pictures in the New Testament is that of Mary as she stands beside the tomb of Jesus, weeping. Complete and utter despair have consumed her because Jesus is dead, but when she discovers that his body is gone, her tragedy is only multiplied. Those of you who have lost a loved one can appreciate the agony of Mary's heart. You know how terribly important it is to you to have the privilege of doing those last things for a loved one and of gazing upon that beloved face for one last, lingering look. Now this has been denied Mary and the Bible pictures her standing beside the empty tomb with the tears streaming down her face.

You see, Mary was still living on the wrong side of Easter. And when you live on the other side of resurrection, on the other side of immortality and life after death, you have reason to cry. In the first place, Mary wept over the death of goodness. For as long as she had known Jesus he had represented to her the best in human life. In him she had come to know all that was good and pure and holy. She, a woman of the streets, had known his forgiveness and his acceptance that made her feel whole again, like a real person. He represented all that was good in the world to her as she saw him touch with compassion the lame, the leper, the sick, the blind. She had listened to his quiet voice speaking of the mysteries of God and over against all of the evilness and sin she had known--over against all of the greed and hate and brutality that she had known--over against the uncaring, unloving attitudes she had discovered in the world--over against all of these stood Jesus, the only truly good man she had ever known. As she stood on the wrong side of Easter, weeping beside his tomb, she wept for goodness. She wept for goodness because evil had crucified and destroyed the only truly good person she had ever known.

Do you ever get the feeling that goodness is dead in the world? Do you sometimes feel that evil is triumphing? Not long ago a newspaper editor received a letter from a man far along in years. His letter went like this: "I am glad that my days here are fast drawing to a close. I began my adult life with the hope that I should live to see peace and love and goodness conquer the world, but it has not worked out that way. I am only glad that I do not have to stay to see what man will do to man in the years that are to come." The papers are full of rape, murder, theft, robbery, extortion, blackmail and crime after crime. More and more we are afraid to venture out at night. No matter how much time, effort and money we pour into making the world a decent, peaceful, fit place to live, it doesn't seem to help. It seems as though goodness in the human heart is dead. Like Mary, we stand beside the tomb on the wrong side of Easter and weep--weep because goodness seems dead.

But notice secondly that standing on the wrong side of Easter Mary wept also for the death of hope. For long bitter centuries the Jews had looked for the one who would come as the Messiah and restore God's chosen people. She had thought that Jesus was that one. Hope had been born in her heart--hope that she had found God's answer to the tragedy of the world--hope that beyond this life of tragedy and sorrow and death there lay a better tomorrow. Yet, whatever hopes had sprung to life in her heart they now lay crushed and dead. Calvary had driven a nail into those hopes and crowned them with bitter thorns. Yes, Mary wept--wept over the ruins of dreams now dead, of promises smashed into fragments, of hope that had died in her heart.

Life cannot be lived without hope. Recently a couple sat in my office. He said he didn't love her any more and he wanted a divorce. She looked at him with the most pitiful expression and tears began to run down her cheeks. "Isn't there any hope?" she asked sadly. Not long ago I stood in the hospital room of a desperately ill friend. He took my hand and his eyes filled as he said with despair, "Isn't there any hope?" Some time ago the police in another city found the body of a man who had taken his own life. Beside him was the note he left. "I have lost my business and my home, my family has left me," he wrote, "all because I am an incurable alcoholic. My case is hopeless and this is the only way out." Have you never felt that way? When life holds no hope for tomorrow, like Mary we simply want to stand and weep.

Then, notice in the third place, that standing on the wrong side of Easter Mary wept because of loneliness. Perhaps this was the greatest blow of all. Jesus had been her friend. She could always count on him. His presence would strengthen and support her. Never again would she see him as she remembered him with the little children in his arms--never see him with the compassion and love shining in his eyes, never hear his quiet gentle voice as he spoke to the people of the love of God. No, a friend was gone, brutally and horribly put to death upon an agonizing cross, and she would never see him again. And that morning on the wrong side of Easter Mary wept in her loneliness.

Do you sometimes feel lonely, too? Those of you who have lost the loved one closest to you know what loneliness is. You know what it is to listen for a voice that never speaks, to listen for a footstep that never falls, to yearn for a touch that never comes, to stretch out a hand across the bed and find it empty. Deep down in our hearts we all long for someone who will love us and be our friend--who will understand our deepest feelings, who will share our every mood, someone who will know all about us and love us just the same, someone who, when things go wrong, when life knocks us down, when dreams are broken, will stand beside us and comfort us. Yes, we can shed a tear with Mary.

Notice in the fourth place, standing on the wrong side of Easter, Mary wept for God. She had believed that Jesus was the Son of God. She had believed that in Jesus God was breaking into human history to redeem it and to assert his lordship over all of life. Yet, now Jesus lay dead, crucified by the ones he sought to save. God had seemed so weak, so ineffective, and evil had seemed so strong. Where was God when the cross was going on?

Have you never felt that way? When I was a young pastor, inexperienced and inadequate, a couple in my congregation lost their little five-year-old daughter. I tried as best I could to minister to them and I told them the doctors had done their best. I'll never forget that father as he looked into my eyes and said heavily, "I know, but where was God?" Yes, surely we have often thought that God was dead, that sin and death and tragedy had prevailed and we were but the poor hapless victims of chance and circumstances. Surely we have felt that the battle of Calvary has been won by the other side.

So, on the wrong side of Easter Mary stood weeping by the tomb--she wept for goodness, she wept for hope, she wept for loneliness, she wept for God. Some years ago the people of India also stood by a tomb weeping. It was three days after the death of their great religious leader, Mahatma Gandhi, and his followers had gathered to hold a meeting of mourning. The opening speech began with these words, "Master, it is three days since you have gone. Come back, come back." Is not this the

plaintive cry of the human heart, "Come back, come back"? It is a presence we want, not just principles; it is a teacher we want, not just teachings; it is a friend we want, not just a memory; it is a living Lord we want and not the dry writings of the distant past. But Christianity is different from every other religion--different because there is another side to Easter. It is different because Mary, standing beside a tomb weeping hears a voice suddenly speak her name, "Mary."

That's what Easter means. It means that on this side of Easter--the right side--we find the living Lord who speaks our name. And see what happens to life when we live on the right side of Easter! We weep for goodness, fearing that evil has the last say. Yet, St. Paul writes, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine or nakedness or sword? Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loveth us." We weep because hope is dead, but the Bible says "We who first hoped in Christ have been destined and appointed to live for the praise of his glory." We weep for loneliness because we need a friend and the living Lord comes to us and says, "I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you." He says, "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the ages." We weep because God is dead, but a living Lord comes and says, "Behold, My hands and My side that it is I." And like doubting Thomas, we fall down in awe and cry out, "My Lord, and My God."

No, goodness isn't dead nor does evil have the last word; yes, we can have hope in the face even of death itself; no, we are not alone, for what a friend we have in Jesus; yes, God is alive and whatever happens, in the end life will make sense. Peter Marshall, in one of his sermons, tells of a little boy with an incurable illness. Month after month the mother tenderly nursed him. But as the time went by, the little fellow gradually began to understand that he would not live. One day he quietly said, "Mother, what is it like to die? Does it hurt? Is it lonely?" His mother fled to the kitchen, pretending to take care of something on the stove, for her eyes filled with tears. She leaned against the kitchen cabinet, her knuckles pressed white against the doors, as she asked God to tell her how to answer her little boy. At once she knew what to say. She returned to his room and said, "Kenneth, you remember when you were a tiny boy you used to play so hard, when night came you would be too tired even to undress, and you would tumble into mother's bed and fall asleep? That was not your bed--it was not where you belonged. In the morning you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. Your father had come and with his big, strong arms he carried you away to your own room. Kenneth, death is just like that. We just wake up some morning and find ourselves in the other room--our room where we belong--because Jesus is alive and he loves us." The little boy seemed satisfied and never questioned it again. Some days later he fell asleep just as she had said. His mother knew that the living Jesus had carried him safely to his own room.

Some years ago an expedition set out for the south pole and one of the members was a man named Edward Wilson. It was a disastrous expedition, for none of the members survived. Later, when the frozen remains of the men were recovered, there was a letter discovered on the body of Edward Wilson addressed to his wife. And there in that frozen waste as he faced certain death, these are the words he wrote, "I leave this life in absolute faith and happy belief that if God wishes you to wait long without me it will be for some good purpose. All is for the best to those that love God, and, my darling, we have both loved him with all our lives. We have struggled to the end and we have nothing to regret. Our whole journey record is clean. Your little testament and prayer book will be in my hand or in my breast pocket when the end comes. All is well."

That is a picture of life on the right side of Easter. Goodness had been worthwhile--hope was in his heart when there seemed to be no hope--he did not face death alone--and God was very real, very alive to him. So, in the face of suffering and pain and death he could still write, "All is well." So it is Easter--and in the presence of the living Lord we can live on the right side of it. Then no matter what life brings, all is well.

That's what Easter means. It means that on this side of Easter--the right side--we find the living Lord who speaks our name. And now what happens to him when we live on the right side of Easter? We wait for goodness, leaning that evil has not last say. Yet, St. Paul writes, "We shall separate us from the law of Christ? Shall tribulation, or anguish, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or death, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us." We wait because hope is dead, but the Bible says "We who thus hoped in Christ have been justified and appointed to live for the praise of his glory." We wait for loneliness because we need a friend and the living Lord comes to us and says, "I will not leave you desolate, I will come to you." He says, "No, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." We wait because God is dead, but a living Lord comes and says, "Behold, my hands and my side that ye see." And like dumb things, we fall down in awe and cry out, "My Lord, and my God."

No, goodness isn't dead nor does evil have the last word; yes, we can have hope in the face even of death itself; yes, we are not alone, for what a friend we have in Jesus; yes, God is alive and whatever happens, in the end life will make sense. Easter is a reality, in one of his sermons, talks of a little boy with an infectious illness. Month after month the mother wearily nursed him. But as the time went by, the little fellow gradually began to understand that he would not live. One day he quietly said, "Mother, that is like to die? Does it hurt? Is it lonely?" His mother tried to the kitchen, pretending to look out of a window on the stove, for her eyes filled with tears. She leaned against the kitchen cabinet, her knuckles pressed white against the knobs, as she asked God to help her how to answer her little boy. At once she knew what to say. She returned to his room and said, "Kenneth, you remember when you were a tiny boy you used to play so hard, when night came you would be too tired even to undress, and you would tumble into mother's bed and fall asleep? That was for your bed--it was not where you belonged. In the morning you would wake up and find yourself in your own bed in your own room. Your father had come and with his big, strong arms he carried you away to your own room. Kenneth, death is just like that. We just wake up some morning and find ourselves in the other room--our room where we belong--because Jesus is alive and he loves us." The little boy seemed satisfied and never questioned it again. Some days later he fell asleep just as he had said. His mother knew that the living Jesus had carried him safely to his own room.

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