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Sermon 4 April 2021

Title: Oh, Mary Don't You Weep

- Good morning church! Christ is risen! (audio response) It is wonderful to be with you on this Easter Sunday morning—the day when we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We have been patiently walking the road to the cross through the sombre days of Lent, but today we arrive at the empty tomb.
- We, of course, know what the empty tomb means—it means that Jesus has been raised from the dead, just as he said he would be. But this morning we're going to be reminded that in the Gospel of John the message of the empty tomb was not received as instantaneously as we might think—we'll see that as has happened throughout John's gospel, Jesus followers don't understand immediately, they need a little further explanation and evidence and time to remember what has been said and written and promised before the full realisation of just what the empty tomb means to them, and to the whole world, and how Jesus' resurrection is the fulfilment, the fullness, of what God has been doing in the world and for His people since the very beginning.
- I want to begin today by reminding you of a couple of ideas that we touched on in last Sunday's sermon, when we looked at the passage from John chapter 12 that described Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. And the first thing I want to remind you of is the centrality, the importance that John's gospel places on the Passover. You may remember that we pointed out last week that John shows us that Jesus intentionally chooses the Passover as the time he comes into Jerusalem, as the time

during which his Passion and the Crucifixion and resurrection will unfold. And John is quite intentional, too, in letting us know that we ought to be aware of the Passover, as he will tell his reader that the Passover is near, or that it's 6 days until the Passover—he wants us to be aware of what time it is, because the fact that the events he is describing are happening at the Passover is important.

- Now, the Passover is the celebration and commemoration of the Exodus, when God led Moses to deliver His people from bondage and oppression under the Egyptian Pharaoh—when God miraculously parts the waters of the Red Sea and the Hebrew people pass through on dry land—and then the waters come crashing down upon the Egyptian army who have been pursuing God's people—that event is the reason that Moses' sister, the prophetess Miriam (that's a Hebrew name that's related to the name "Mary")—well Miriam sings a song about how "Our God is a warrior God, the horse and rider He has thrown into the sea"—that is, Pharaoh's army got drowned—a lot of scholars think that Miriam's song is the oldest scripture in the Bible.
- Of course, after God has led them to freedom, the Hebrew people are given the Law, the 10 commandments, and a covenant is established between them and God in which they are called to be a royal priesthood under God's reign, and God guides and provides for them as they journey toward the Promised Land
- And so all of this is celebrated each year during the Passover festival.
- But it's worth remembering, and so you should remember this as we work through this sermon, it's worth remembering that the Passover gets its name from the last of the ten plagues that God struck Egypt with—when the Angel of Death moved through Egypt and the firstborn sons of every household died, when the Hebrews

were told to slaughter a lamb and to paint their doorposts with the blood of the lamb that was slain—so their firstborn sons wouldn't be sacrificed because the Angel of Death would "pass over" them as if their doors were locked. That of course was what it took for Pharaoh to "let Moses' people go." It was that event that ended their captivity—and then the Red Sea crashing in on Pharaoh's army guaranteed it—very much like the crucifixion brings freedom and the resurrection confirms it.

- Now last week we also talked about how what happens in the Exodus, the events that are celebrated at Passover, how over the years in Hebrew tradition that story of the Passover had been connected with the story of Creation. And we pointed out that there is a pattern to those two narratives: in the Exodus God had demonstrated his power over the threatening waters of the Red Sea, creating dry land in the midst of them, destroying the enemy and calling the Children of Israel into covenant with Him-- and in the creation narrative God moves upon the surface of the waters, bringing forth dry land, creating humankind and calling them into relationship with Him. But of course we know that in the creation narrative, humanity, which has been created by God on the sixth day, before God rests on the seventh—that's why the Hebrew people observed the Sabbath, remember—so humanity was created the day before the Sabbath—but humanity had decided not to follow God's rules—well, just the one rule really—and had been tempted by the promise of being "like God" by eating that forbidden fruit—they considered equality with God a thing to be grasped—and thus brought sin and death into the world through what we call the "Fall."
- And John in his gospel often makes reference to these two narratives—the creation and the Passover—in order to show us what Jesus' life and death and resurrection

mean and how we are to understand that God is at work through the incarnation just as He was when all things were created, and just as He was in the Passover and Exodus. And so John begins his gospel by telling us that the Word, Jesus, was there with God in the beginning and that all things were made through Him—this is the story of creation right there from the start in Chapter 1, and then in Chapter 2, Jesus performs his first miracle—which, of course involves his power to control and to transform water—just like those waters in the creation story, and just like the Red Sea—and John tells us immediately after that in Chapter 2 that “the Passover of the Jews was near,” and Jesus went to Jerusalem—where Jesus talks about his death and resurrection, but his audience doesn’t know it yet—they think he’s talking about destroying the temple—But already in the first two chapters, John has set up this Creation/Passover connection with the crucifixion and resurrection—because the crucifixion and resurrection in John’s gospel can be understood as enacting a new Passover and a new creation. But let’s not get ahead of ourselves.

- As we saw last week, John reiterates this connection between creation and Exodus or Passover very clearly in other places in his gospel, like in chapter 6 when Jesus walks on water—again showing God’s power over the threatening and chaotic forces of the sea just like in the creation story and in the Exodus—and then he refers to himself as the bread of heaven like the manna in the wilderness—he even mentions Moses by name-- and then he foreshadows the last supper that establishes the new covenant—and that supper would take place during the Passover, before his crucifixion—and then he says that those who eat his flesh and drink his blood will have eternal life—that they won’t die like their ancestors, the sons of Adam, who brought death into the world.

- And so as we work our way through the rest of today's sermon, I want you to be aware of the way that John refers to the creation and the Passover narratives to help his reader understand what is happening—particularly what has happened in the crucifixion and what is happening in the resurrection. Passover and creation; creation and Passover.
- Now let's look at our scripture.
- We are in the 20th chapter of John's gospel today—that's almost at the end—one chapter left, and at the beginning of this penultimate chapter, Jesus has, in the previous chapter, been crucified and his side has been pierced and blood and water has come out, and Jesus has died and Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, who we met back in chapter 3, come and take Jesus' body and wrap it and put it in a brand-new tomb in a nearby garden. The Jews, we're told, didn't want the bodies hanging on the Sabbath, especially a Passover Sabbath, because it was a day of great solemnity. So they took the bodies down on the Day of Preparation—the day before the Sabbath. John tells us that it's the Day of Preparation **twice** in the last 11 verses of chapter 19.
- And then when we get to chapter 20 we see that on the first day of the week, the day after the Sabbath, Mary Magdalene has come to the tomb where they put Jesus and she sees that the stone has been rolled away. She interprets this as meaning that someone has taken Jesus' body, and so she runs and tells that to Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. Now, John mentions this "disciple Jesus loved" many times in his gospel, and we don't really know who he is—a lot of people think it's John himself, the one who's writing this gospel—and that theory makes a lot of sense to me—especially when you read things like what John tells us here in chapter

20, that Peter and the beloved disciple ran to the tomb but John makes sure to give us this particular detail—he makes sure we know that the beloved disciple “outran Peter and reached the tomb first.” And then John tells us that the beloved disciple looks in the tomb and sees that Jesus isn’t there—and then Peter goes into the tomb first, and then John tells us in verse 8 that “the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in”--- he had to tell us one more time that the beloved disciple got there first, just to make sure we know. And I wonder if maybe Peter might disagree with him about who won the race to the tomb—but Peter isn’t writing this gospel, John is, and so we get his opinion on who outran whom.

- But the bottom line is that these two men looked in the tomb and believed what Mary had told them because they had seen it with their own eyes. Jesus’ body had been taken. After all, it was the most plausible, the simplest explanation. If a corpse was in a tomb and now it’s not, it’s a safe bet that somebody moved it. Occam’s razor tells us that the simplest explanation is the most likely—so somebody has taken Jesus’ body somewhere else. So John tells us that “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.” So they go home—and we could imagine that they would have been pretty disappointed and confused and anxious and sad, and probably angry, too, about the situation.
- We know that Mary isn’t happy at all about it. She stayed behind and she’s standing outside the tomb, weeping. And as she weeps, she looks inside the tomb and sees two angels sitting there where Jesus body had been.
- They ask her “Woman, why are you weeping?”
- Now maybe it’s because she’s upset, or maybe she just had a Stoic personality, but Mary seems remarkably unfazed by the fact that she’s engaged in a conversation

with two angels—but she tells them just as she’s told Peter and the other disciple
“they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

- And that would certainly be reason enough to weep. Jesus has been betrayed, arrested, beaten, tortured, mutilated, crucified, put on display and mocked and finally his body was laid in the tomb so at least the horror seemed to have ended so the grieving could begin, but now in an additional assault, Jesus’ body has been taken—by someone they don’t know, and they don’t know where. Imagine how violated, how abused, how confused and fearful Mary and Jesus’ other followers must have felt—an unthinkable bad, terrible, awful situation that had seemed like it could get no worse, had in fact just gotten worse. Hopeless circumstances were now even more hopeless. And so Mary weeps.
- She weeps because she does not understand what has happened.
- Has she forgotten about what happened to Lazarus? Have Peter and the other disciple forgotten as well?
- Back in chapter 11, John has told us about Lazarus’ death and resurrection—and you’ll remember that last Sunday we said that Lazarus’ resurrection was proleptic—a proleptic occurrence of the coming resurrection of all creation, of which the resurrection of Jesus would be the first fruit. When we look back at chapter 11 through the lens of chapter 20, we can hear the echoes of what’s coming. In chapter 11 we also find Mary, Lazarus’ sister Mary, weeping—and Jesus, who has told Martha “I am the resurrection and the life” asks Mary where they have laid his body—that’s what Mary and the disciples want to know in chapter 20—and then Jesus tells them to take away the stone so that they may see the glory of God—so here in Lazarus’ resurrection we get a glimpse of the glorification of Jesus, a

foreshadowing of what is coming. And then, at the end of chapter 11, in verse 55, after John has told us about Lazarus' death and burial and how he was raised from the dead, John tells us, "the Passover was near." The **Passover** was near.

- And I don't think that John is just talking about the Passover festival—I think John is talking about another Passover—a new Passover—a new lamb that will be slain, another enemy to be defeated—the last enemy, death itself—another exodus from oppression. I believe that John is telling us that just as He did in the first Passover, God is working to free His people from bondage and to restore the relationship between them through a new covenant—a new Passover--the Passover is near.
- But remember now, John uses not just the imagery of the Passover to help us understand Jesus' life and death and resurrection, but also imagery of the Creation.
- Let's return to chapter 20. Mary was weeping—because she didn't understand what was happening. She didn't understand what had happened.
- So Mary has told the two angels at Jesus' tomb why she is weeping. And then John in verse 14 tells us that she turns around and sees Jesus standing there but she doesn't recognise him—she thinks he's the gardener—and he asks her, just as the angels have, "Woman, why are you weeping?" and he adds "Who are you looking for?" Mary still doesn't recognise him and says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."
- Now there's a little detail here that it might be easy just to read right over, and that detail is this: Mary mistakes Jesus for the **gardener**.
- You may notice on our graphic for the sermon this week we've used Rembrandt's painting of Mary and Jesus at the tomb, and you may also notice that Jesus is wearing a wide-brimmed hat and he's carrying a shovel. Now, Rembrandt is not the

only painter to use this technique to illustrate the fact that Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener—other painters portray Jesus dressed as a gardener, carrying some tool or another, because it makes sense that they would let us know about that particular detail visually—by making Jesus LOOK like the gardener. But I don't think John means to imply that Jesus was wearing a big hat and carrying a shovel. I think he had something else in mind.

- The Greek word that John uses there that is translated “gardener” is *képouros*, and it is a combination of two words: *képos*, which means a garden, and *ouros*—a watcher or a keeper—a person who guards and protects and takes care of.
- In Genesis 2, when God creates Adam and Eve, verse 15 tells us that God put them there, in that garden, to “keep” it—the Hebrew means not only to keep but also to guard and protect and take care of—like the Greek *ouros*.
- So Adam and Eve are also “*képouros*,” like the gardener that Mary mistakes Jesus for.
- And so you might think, “that’s an interesting use of that creation imagery we have been talking about,” and you’d be right about that, but one thing I’ve noticed about the gospel of John is that when John wants his reader to notice something, he doesn’t just mention it once—he’ll work in a reference to it two or three times to make sure his reader doesn’t miss the point he’s trying to make.
- And so while John tells us here in chapter 20 that Mary thinks Jesus is the gardener, the *kepouros*—he has already told us in chapter 18 that Jesus and his disciples go to a garden—a *kepos*—where Jesus is arrested—and then after the crucifixion, in chapter 19, Joseph and Nicodemus take Jesus’ body and put it in the tomb. John describes that situation like this, beginning with verse 41 of Chapter 19—now listen

closely to this: 41 Now there was a garden—a *kepos*-- in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden (that's twice now that John has used the word "garden" in this sentence) --in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. 42 And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

- Now what did John just tell us? After he was crucified, Jesus was placed in a garden in a tomb where no one had been laid before, on the Day of Preparation. You'll remember the Day of Preparation is the day before the Sabbath—so Jesus is the FIRST PERSON—no one has been there before-- to be placed in that GARDEN on the day before the Sabbath. Remember when God created humanity and placed them in the garden where no one had been before to keep it? The day before the Sabbath. When John tells us that Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener, the keeper of the garden, he is telling us more than just that.
- John could hardly be more obvious in his reference to creation here—the implication is clear. **The crucifixion and resurrection are the new creation—things have been made new—and Jesus is the new Adam**—not the Adam who brought death into the world, but the Adam who brings life, not the Adam who was fallen, but the Adam who has risen, not the Adam who came from the earth, but the Adam who came from Heaven, not the Adam who was created, but the Adam through whom all things were created, not the Adam who was perishable, but the Adam who is imperishable, not the Adam sown in dishonour, but the Adam raised in glory, not the Adam to whom life was given, but the Adam who gives life, not the Adam in whom all die, but the Adam in whom all will be made alive, not the Adam who considered equality with God a thing to be grasped, but the Adam who didn't, who emptied

himself, even to death on a cross, and who is therefore exalted and given a name above every other name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. A new Adam. A new creation.

- If I'm not careful I might start preaching here.
- If you want to read more about all that, take a look at 1 Corinthians chapter 15 and Philippians chapter 2. The Apostle Paul has a lot to say about it.
- Let's return to our scripture. Jesus has asked Mary, just as the angels have, "Woman, why are you weeping?" but even after hearing his voice Mary still doesn't recognise him and says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."
- But then something happens. Verse 16: Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).
- When Jesus calls her name, Mary recognises Jesus. Mary knows her teacher, her rabbi. Mary realises who Jesus is and begins to understand what has happened. She begins to see that the empty tomb that she thought meant that the situation that was bad enough and getting worse, was in fact unimaginably good. When Jesus calls her name and she responds her situation is transformed, reborn, made new.
- The same is true for us this Easter morning—when Jesus calls your name and you respond things become clear—situations are made new—we pass from darkness into light, from despair into hope, from death into life, from bondage into freedom, from slavery to liberty, from guilt to forgiveness, from grief into joy.
- And at that moment the question that both Jesus and the angels ask Mary begins to make sense—Mary, why are you weeping? **Why** are you weeping? Don't you know,

don't you see? Don't you understand? Don't you recognise who is standing in front of you—he's none other than the new Adam, none other than the lamb who was slain. Oh, Mary don't you weep, don't mourn. Oh Mary don't you weep, don't mourn. Pharaoh's army got drowned—Oh Mary don't you weep.

- Those words are from an African-American spiritual, a folk song that enslaved people used to sing on the plantations where they were used and abused as forced labour. And that song gave voice to their longing for liberation, their longing for freedom from bondage, their longing for a promised land, for a new creation where things were different, and even though they had limited access to the Holy scriptures, only what little bit their oppressors wanted to mete out to them, those portions that would justify their continued servitude, I believe the Holy Spirit was working, I believe that as he always does, Jesus was calling the names of the grieving and the sorrowful and the poor and the desperate and the oppressed and they understood the way that the crucifixion and the resurrection and the Exodus and the creation told a story of freedom—they looked to the one who had become a slave, one who was condemned and mistreated and crucified and dead and buried, but was lifted up. The new Adam, the lamb who was slain—and all at once we hear the story of Miriam by the Red Sea and of Lazarus' sister Mary and of Mary Magdalene at the tomb with Jesus: Oh, Mary don't you Weep, Pharaoh's army got drowned.
- After Mary recognises Jesus, he tells her not to touch him because he has yet to ascend to the Father, and Mary goes and tells the other disciples that she has seen the Lord. But then when evening comes, when darkness begins to fall, like their ancestors in Egypt the disciples have locked the doors of the house where they're gathered because they are afraid of who might come in, and that's when Jesus

descends from Heaven and stands with them there in their midst—unlike the destroyer that struck down the firstborn sons at that first Passover, Jesus passes through that locked door and brings not death and sorrow, but peace and life. The Passover lamb who has been slain from the foundations of the world, from the beginning, from creation, stands with them; the enemy has been defeated—Pharaoh’s army got drowned.

- Today is the anniversary of the assassination, the martyrdom, of Rev. Dr Martin Luther King, who was gunned down in Memphis Tennessee on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. A lot of folks saw that image in 1968 and thought a bad situation had just gotten a whole lot worse—that things were just going to be the way they were—maybe they were going to have to keep on living with inequality and injustice—maybe freedom was too much to hope for—maybe things were hopeless. That’s what Mary thought, too, when she saw that empty tomb. But then she saw Jesus. And then he called her name. Oh Mary don’t you weep, don’t you mourn.
- As I’ve been studying the scriptures this week and preparing for this sermon, the words of that song have been echoing in my mind. We’ll hear them sung in just a moment, the words of this spiritual that was born in the horrors of slavery a couple of centuries ago, that continued through the voices of sharecroppers and field hands, that made its way into churches and homes and into the larger society and was carried by folksingers all around the world, into streets filled with demonstrators during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and on into the 21st century, because of the way that it combines faith in the resurrection—Oh Mary don’t you weep--with the stories of creation—God made man and He made him out of clay, put him on Earth but not to stay—and the Exodus—Moses stood by the Red Sea shore,

smote the water with a two-by-four-- and others, like the assurance of salvation—
Old Mr. Satan, he got mad, he missed that soul that he thought he had—and even
apocalyptic judgement—one of these night's 'bout 12 o'clock, this old world is gonna
rock—God gave Noah the rainbow sign, no more water but fire next time

- and this spiritual combines all those stories into into an inspiring call to hope—
brothers and sisters, don't **you** cry, there'll be better times by and by—that's a call to
see things as they are in God's kingdom, not according to the standards and the
opinions and interpretations of this world—it's a call to realise what the empty tomb
really means—like Mary does when Jesus calls her name—and Jesus is calling each
one of us this Easter morning—calling us as He did Mary to go and tell that we have
seen the Lord, that he called us by name, that He has risen—that's a call that
transforms situations; that's a call that turns grief into joy and bondage into
freedom—it's a call to embrace the victory that the cross and resurrection have
won—it's a call to proclaim that death is not the victor—it's a call to say "O death,
where is Thy sting?" The enemy has been defeated. Oh Mary, don't you weep,
Pharaoh's army got drowned.

NOTE: To learn more about the song *Oh, Mary Don't You Weep*, check out Victoria Emily
Jones' very informative article, "*Oh Mary, Don't You Weep: Death, Resurrection, and the
New Exodus*" available at: [https://artandtheology.org/2016/04/14/oh-mary-dont-you-
weep-death-resurrection-and-the-new-exodus/](https://artandtheology.org/2016/04/14/oh-mary-dont-you-weep-death-resurrection-and-the-new-exodus/)