

Message: “Wipe Away Your Tears”

I don’t know about you and your household, but Esperanza and I need this Easter Sunday. Yes, we miss being with you and celebrating together in the sanctuary. Yes, we miss seeing all the colorful Easter clothes and the lilies. Yes, we miss the Easter egg hunt and the excited stories of children sharing their morning surprises. We all miss those things. But we don’t need them. They are nice to have. We want them and there’s nothing wrong with any of those activities.

What we need on this Easter Sunday goes deeper. Our soul needs – demands (!), to be fed on this day. What we need on this Easter Sunday is to encounter the resurrected Savior, Jesus Christ. He is the single, most important thing we all need on this day.

Why? This year, more than any other I can remember, we understand our need. Like Mary and the women who came to Jesus’ tomb on the first Easter Sunday almost 2,000 years ago, we are heart-broken and filled with grief. We know all too well how hearts are broken watching our loved ones gasping for breath while we are forced to remain at a distance. The death of our loved ones, the threats of disease, hate and violence, seeing oppression and injustice happen and knowing no one is free, all these and more fill our hearts and minds, sapping our strength, challenging our will. Our souls are fatigued.

Like Mary, we need to encounter and embrace Jesus. We need it more than ever. We need the breath-taking, jaw-dropping surprise of meeting the One who died on a cross to set us free from death, sin and shame. We need to know faith, hope and love win. We need to be able to wipe away our tears and smile, knowing everything will be all right. Jesus gives us this gift. That’s what makes Easter special.

Evil never had a chance. God took the moment – Jesus on a cross; when Satan and those corrupted by power thought they had won and turned things around. All of creation shifted on its axis, away from a course toward death and annihilation, and on a course toward life and freedom. The conflict, injustice, cruelty and shame of Jesus’ death was replaced by the peace, justice, love and honor of Jesus’ kingdom and the promise of eternal life for all who believe.

We need to be surprised by God's goodness. When we're grieving the most, we need to feel the gentle presence of the Lord in our lives. The last act Jesus did on the cross was to care for his mother Mary. He asked John to care for her as his mother. The very first words Jesus says to Mary after rising from the dead are, "*Why are you crying?*" Jesus shows compassion from his last breath to his first. Such simple words, yet they mean so much.

You see, the world will fail us. People will fail us. Our co-workers and peers will fail us. Our pastors will fail us. Our close friends and family, even our BFFs, will fail us. Try as they might, their strength, courage and love have limits and conditions. If we're really honest, the same is true for us. We have failed our loved ones and others.

I have good news: God's love never fails!

Want proof? The resurrected Christ is our proof. Jesus' first words are our proof. There is no one else in all of history who foretold their death and resurrection. Jesus did, over and over again. A few days before he died, Jesus told his disciples, "*Soon you won't be able to see me; soon after that, you will see me*" (John 16:16, CEB).

What does that mean? They didn't understand. So Jesus explains, "*The sadness you have right now is similar to [the pain of childbirth], but the coming joy [in your new life] is also similar. When I see you again, you'll be full of joy, and it will be a joy no one can rob from you Take heart! I've conquered the world*" (vv21-23, 33, MSG).

Jesus is Immanuel, God with us, God made flesh. God entered into the world to share the full experience of what it means to be human. Jesus experienced the harsh reality of life in the world. He knows our pain and suffering from first-hand experience. Jesus laughs and weeps with us. Jesus experienced death for us so we can have a new, life with him. When we believe in him, we're given a whole and completely new life. The hidden spiritual side of us wakes up. Our soul begins to flourish and grow, bearing fruit. We experience life as part of God's family and it is marvelous. And, when we die, we will be resurrected, just as Jesus was. That is proof God's love is greater than the world's greatest evil, even death itself. **Hallelujah! Can I get an "amen"?**

The reality of Jesus' death on the cross is put in perspective by the empty tomb and the resurrected Christ on Easter morning. The way to new life isn't by avoiding suffering and death, but by holding onto Jesus tightly as we live through it. When we feel defeated and lost, when we're struggling to understand the death of our loved ones and our own mortality, God's grace shows its power with perfect love. Our Savior is risen to make things new!

All the people, authorities and powers who thought they had power and control over us discover they no longer do when we embrace our Lord and Savior. Even if our bodies and minds are trapped and bound, our souls are set free. God kept the promise to save us. Jesus completed the work. The Holy Spirit guides us along the way. With God by our side, there is nothing we can't do. Let your imagination run free!

John Wesley did. He said this, *"Give me one hundred [persons] who fear nothing but sin and desire nothing but God, and I care not whether they be clergy or lay, they alone will shake the gates of Hell and set up the kingdom of Heaven upon the earth."*¹ The founder of the Methodist movement didn't start out to create a new denomination. God did. Suzanna Wesley didn't know she was raising children who would change the world by faith. God did.

How will you respond to God's life-giving, life-changing grace?

You may not know what God is doing, but when you hear the call, when you're prompted by the Holy Spirit, when you feel the tug on your heart, I encourage you to say, "Here I am, Lord. Send me!"

One final thought on this Easter Sunday. Jesus said, *"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live, even though they die. Everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"* (John 11:25-26).

All you need to do is truly and fully believe in Jesus. God's grace does the rest. I invite you to confess your belief. Then, let's roll up our sleeves, get to work and share the good news with everyone we meet.

Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed.

¹ <https://smartandrelentless.com/top-30-john-wesley-quotes-the-mind-of-a-missionary/>

John 20:1-18 (CEB)

Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him." Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn't go in. Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus' head. It wasn't with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. They didn't yet understand the scripture that Jesus must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to the place where they were staying.

Mary stood outside near the tomb, crying. As she cried, she bent down to look into the tomb. She saw two angels dressed in white, seated where the body of Jesus had been, one at the head and one at the foot. The angels asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

She replied, "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've put him." As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she didn't know it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she replied, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Aramaic, "Rabbouni" (which means *Teacher*).

Jesus said to her, "Don't hold on to me, for I haven't yet gone up to my Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them, 'I'm going up to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene left and announced to the disciples, "I've seen the Lord." Then she told them what he said to her.