

A Good Enough Faith

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Easter Sunday, April 17, 2022, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

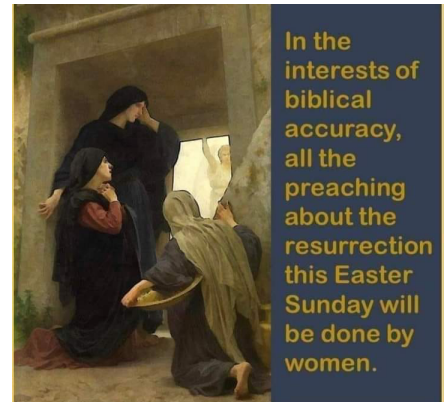
Scripture: [John 20:1-18](#)

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While I was scrolling through Facebook yesterday morning, I saw a post than made me chuckle. I don't remember exactly what it said, but it was something like: If you church has a sunrise Easter service, only women should be allowed to go to it. Then they can tell the men, who will be so excited that they'll run to the 10:00 service.

Later, I saw this one. "In the interests of biblical accuracy, all the preaching about the resurrection this Easter Sunday will be done by women." My apologies: you're stuck with me.

In all four gospels, the first people to go to the tomb where Jesus had been buried, the first people to find the empty tomb, the first people to experience the resurrection were women. The names vary from one account to another. In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it's a handful of women who go to the tomb. In John's account, it appears to be just one woman who goes to the tomb: Mary Magdalene.¹ In fact, the one person who shows up in all four accounts is Mary Magdalene. Is it any wonder that she is given the honorific "Magdalene"? Mary, the tower of faith. Mary, the magnified.²



While it was still dark, John tells us, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed. Her heart had been torn out at the execution of her beloved rabbi, and they wouldn't even leave his body alone. They had come and stolen his body during the Sabbath or in the middle of the night. She ran back and told two of the disciples that Jesus' body had been stolen.

Peter and the beloved disciple ran back with her to the tomb, and sure enough, just as she had described, the tomb had been disturbed, the stone removed, the body missing. All they saw were the linen cloths that had been used to wrap the body. John says that the beloved disciples saw this and believed, and still didn't understand that was going on. I love that. It rings so true to my experience: belief and not understanding held simultaneously.

The disciples headed back home, and Mary stayed at the tomb. She looked in and saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. They asked her,

¹ I say, "appears to be," because Mary does use "we" when reporting what happened to Peter and the beloved disciple.

² While "Magdalene" has long been assumed to refer to a town that Mary came from, recent scholarship suggests that "Magdalene" is, in fact, an honorific derived from the Hebrew and Aramaic roots for *tower* or *magnified*. See Yonat Shimron, Religious News Service, quoted in "Was Mary Magdalene really from Magdala? Two scholars examine the evidence," *Christian Century*, 9 February 2022 edition, p. 16.

“Woman why are you weeping?” and she said to them, “They've taken away my Lord and I do not know where they laid him.”

Woman why are you weeping? I love Nadia Bolz-Weber’s response to this question.³ “I must confess that I used to hear this as a slightly passive aggressive question, as if the angels were implying that Mary was overreacting. Or this question was the equivalent of sending her some vapid ‘don’t worry, be happy’ meme,... as if Christian faith is mostly a mechanism to bypass negative emotions in favor of delusional positivity.” As if Mary didn’t need to grieve. “Theologically speaking, this is what we call ‘hogwash’.”⁴

I firmly believe that grief is holy to God. I have come to believe that grief isn’t “the cost of having loved.” Rather, I have come to believe grief is an expression of love. Sometimes our love is so deep, it leaks out our eyes. And when Jesus cried at Lazarus’ tomb, his tears were just as salty as yours or mine.

No, the question the angels ask is not an accusation. The question is an invitation. Why are you weeping. Tell us your story, Mary. Tell us your grief. Don’t bypass the truth of your sadness. Tell the truth of the darkness you’re experiencing. Tell the truth of how you feel robbed. Tell the truth of how “death is a thief we cannot put on trial and punish.”⁵ Tell the truth about how the grief you’re feeling now “has opened the door and let in so much other grief” and that you “don’t know how to uninvite its friends to this party.”⁶

It’s been almost four years since my best friend died. The grief I feel with the death of my stepmother has invited the grief I still feel from the death of Lizann to make its presence know. And I have found myself longing to hear her voice, longing to hear her call me by name, longing to see her seeing me in a way that no one else ever has.

Grief is an expression of love, and it is holy to God. “While there are those who would reduce the Christian faith to moralism and delusional positivity, we know that the God we worship is not a shiny toothed motivational speaker churning out cheerful memes in times of suffering. We know that the God we worship is a crucified and risen God. Which is to say, we worship a God that is also not unfamiliar with darkness, a God who comes close to those who mourn, a God who comes close to those who stand outside tombs, a God who is not far off, but who is as close as that choppy breath that falters when you’re sobbing.”⁷

Nadia Bolz-Weber so eloquently expressed why Mary was weeping. “I think she was crying because, having felt divine love in the presence of Jesus, she knew she couldn’t go back to living without it and she didn’t quite know yet she wouldn’t have to. So she cried, saying they’ve taken him away and I don’t know where he is. They’ve taken love away and I don’t know where it is. They’ve taken kindness away, they’ve taken my own wholeness

³ Much of this sermon has been influenced by (and I’ll be quoting from) Nadia Bolz-Weber’s sermon preached at the funeral for her friend Rachel Held Evans, <https://rachelhelddevans.com/funeral>.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

away and I don't know where it is. And so, while it was still dark, she went to his tomb thinking maybe the tomb was the end of the story."⁸

And then she learned that it wasn't the end of the story. Turning from the angels and the tomb, she bumped into someone who must have been the gardener. Maybe he knows what's happened to the body. And then the gardener says her name. Then the gardener calls her back to herself, and she realizes it's not the gardener. It's her beloved Rabbi.

"Go and tell the boys," Jesus instructs her. Have you ever wondered by Mary Magdalene got this job? "I don't think it was because she had followed the instructions for how to make herself worthy to witness the resurrection. And I don't think it was because she fit the high priest description of an ideal preacher. And I don't think it was because she had pure doctrine. [And] most importantly, I don't think it was *despite* who she was; I'm pretty sure it was *because* of who she was.... I think Mary was chosen because she knew what it was like for God to move, not when the lilies are already out and the lights are on, but while it's still dark. Because, unlike when the men looked in and saw only laundry, when Mary Magdalene looked in the tomb, she saw angels. Mary Magdalene saw angels because she was not unfamiliar with the darkness. She had the kind of night vision that only comes from seeing what God does while it's still dark.

"I do not know why this is God's economy, that it's while we're still in despair, while we're still grieving, while we were still sinners, while we are sure that nothing good will ever come – that it's when we're faced with the nothingness of death that were closest to resurrection, that while it's still dark, God does most wondrous work."⁹

It's not because Mary Magdalene had perfect faith that Jesus picked her to be the first one to tell of good news of the resurrection. It was because her faith was good enough.

Last January, Liz Wagoner came home from the store with her arms full. At the bottom of one of the bags was a brand-new candle in a glass. As she struggled to get the bags on the counter, one of them fell – the one with the candle. It landed hard with the sound of shattering glass. Her new candle, ruined. Frustrated, she was ready to throw the whole mess away, when her husband stopped her.

"It will still light; it will still serve its purpose," he told her.

Liz started to argue: "But it's broken and ugly and glass is everywhere. It's just not the same." She walked away.

When she came back into the kitchen, she saw the candle on the counter, the wick lit and burning. She noticed that her heart was drawn to the light. "How often," she wondered, "do we do this in our own lives or with others? Things don't turn out the way we want them to. Plans fail. Dreams shatter. Goals hit the floor. People break our hearts. And we are ready to throw the whole dang thing in the trash. Even though it can still light ... still shine ... still bring the



⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

fragrance of goodness. It just may not be pretty or in the package that we wanted or imagined.”¹⁰ But it still is good enough.

Even in the darkness (whatever that darkness is for you – fear, grief, anxiety, loneliness) your faith is good enough. So we can say, even if we don’t really know what we’re saying, “Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!”

¹⁰ Liz Liles Wagoner, *Facebook* post, <https://www.facebook.com/lizlileswagoner/posts/10224625171684102> (posted 30 January 2022; accessed sometime in February 2022).