

Mary Magdalene

Psalm 42.1-10 • John 20.1-2,11-18

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Christ Church, Chelsea

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‘But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.’

May I speak...

Grief is an extraordinary, powerful, thing. For all the tidiness of those popular models of seven stages, we know that grief is messy and unpredictable. In his journal entries after the death of his wife, Joy, the writer C.S. Lewis laid out some of his experience: it feels sometimes like fear; sometimes like being mildly drunk, or concussed; sometimes like it makes you an embarrassment to your friends; sometimes consumed by ‘mad midnight moments’, sometimes by apathy.¹

When Mary Magdalene stands outside the empty tomb in the pre-dawn darkness, she weeps. And she weeps because she is grieving. So we have to be clear about her tears. This is not just some piece of quiet, private, cathartic weeping such as any rom-com invites in us. This is Mary overcome with grief. This is whole-body, mind-bending, gut-wrenching, weeping. She stands, physically alone, beside the empty tomb, perhaps feeling as so many bereaved people do as more alone than she had ever thought possible.

But, gazing on this moment outside the tomb, I want to ask a perhaps surprising question. Are we to praise Mary’s weeping? When I say ‘Magdalene’ most of you will immediately think of Mary, who I celebrate today. But if I say ‘maudlin’, I imagine this congregation will split in two. Those of you who are University Challenge fans will immediately fill in the pause with ‘College, Oxford’ – or indeed Cambridge. But others of you may hear the word ‘maudlin’. We don’t use it much nowadays. It’s one of those words like ‘fulsome’ that we recognise, but might struggle to define. The OED is pretty direct.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, (Faber and Faber, 1966), pp.5, 11, 31.

'Maudlin': adjective. 'Having reached the stage of drunkenness characterized by tearful sentimentality and effusive displays of affection'; or, 'shallow sentimentality; mawkishly emotional; weakly sentimental'.² Reflecting on his grief, C.S. Lewis writes ashamedly of crying 'maudlin tears', in a 'bath of self-pity'.³

Maudlin. It's an adjective that comes directly from Mary Magdalene. Not so much from this story of Mary by the empty tomb, to be clear. It's more directly drawn from the story in Luke's gospel with which Mary Magdalene has traditionally, if wrongly, been associated – the moment where Jesus is having dinner with others when a sinful woman enters the room, and washes Jesus's feet with her tears (Luke 7.36-50). In that story Jesus praises the woman for the love she has shown. To say that someone's behaviour is 'maudlin' is, however, no sign of praise.

Why our British condemnation of such tears? Well, as ever, there is a history to it. And as Thomas Dixon shows in his wonderful book *Weeping Britannia*, it's a history that finds its turning point in the Reformation. For in the face of the tearful devotions of late medieval Catholicism, the Reformers sought to emphasise the importance of faith in God. Faced with the death of a loved one, tears were an ineffectual – even blasphemous – response, that displayed a lack of faith in the power of God to save humanity. 'Maudlin' comes into our English vocabulary in the early seventeenth century, hot on the heels of that dramatic shift against certain kinds of emotional expression.⁴

Tears continued, as Dixon observes, to feature in various ways in our British emotional lives over the centuries that followed. But they became positively unwelcome in that sixty-year or so period at the start of the last century in which the 'stiff upper lip' became the epitome of British emotional virtue. When, for example, Rudyard Kipling's only son Jack went missing at the front during World War One, his grief-stricken father put great effort into finding out what had happened to him. One private reported that he had seen eighteen-year-old second lieutenant Kipling, his mouth badly shattered by a piece of shrapnel, trying to fix a dressing on it. He would have helped, this soldier said. But he saw that Jack 'was crying' from pain and he

² Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "maudlin, adj.", July 2023.
<<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/7477484496>>

³ Lewis, *Grief*, p.6.

⁴ Thomas Dixon, *Weeping Britannia: Portrait of a Nation in Tears*, (OUP, 2015), p.38.

had not wished to 'humiliate him by offering assistance'. Jack had broken the code of the stiff upper lip. His tears cost him the aid of one of his regiment. What a horribly ironic twist to the words his father had written twenty years previously: 'If you can keep your head when all about you / Are losing theirs .. / You'll be a man, my son.'⁵

Tears have a history. So what do you see when you ponder Mary Magdalene, weeping by the tomb? What do you hear, when first the angels, and then Jesus himself, say to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' Are you unsurprised that it is Mary and not one of the male disciples whose weeping we have described in this way? Do you hear something disdainful in that word 'woman', as if first the angels and then Christ are condemning some kind of feminine expression of emotion?

I am certainly tempted to read the text in this way. But I think that speaks more to my own emotional educational, at the tail-end of that brief if powerful era of the stiff upper lip. For it is, as therapists and psychologists rightfully insist to us today, good and healthy that we all – male and female – recognise and express our emotions. That might be hard to do if our lives have been spent trying to bury our emotions. C.S. Lewis had no reason to be ashamed of his tears. They were an important part of his grieving. We do well – in a safe, and supported, environment, to let our emotions show, and to learn to live with them as integral to who we are.

And our scriptures certainly seem to recognise that tears are an entirely normal, an entirely rational, response to the situations of this life. 'My tears have been my meat day and night', sang our choir in today's Psalm (42.3a). When Peter recognised his betrayal of Jesus, 'he went out and wept bitterly' (Luke 22.62). When Jesus came to the graveside of his friend Lazarus, he wept (John 11.35).

So Mary weeps by the tomb. Perhaps she screams. Perhaps she doubles over at the gut-wrenching pain. But that is good, faithful weeping. She weeps as she recalls the suffering of her friend Jesus. She weeps at the injustice of his death. She weeps because he is no

⁵ Dixon, *Weeping Britannia*, p.214.

longer here. She weeps because this is wrong, deeply wrong. This is not how the world is supposed to be.

And yet Mary's tears are short-lived. For Jesus is not dead. He is alive; he is risen. Mary's tears of sorrow turn to tears of joy. With the greatest delight she runs in the dawn light through the streets of Jerusalem to announce to the disciples: 'I have seen the Lord'.

Our tears may last longer. As we weep in memory of the ones who have loved us, and who we have loved, we know that we shall not see them so soon as Mary. Time will pass. The grief will go on, and we will carry that grief with us in who we become.

But, seen from the span of eternity, our tears will be short-lived. It's no surprise that one of the most popular texts at funerals is that vision from the climax of the Book of Revelation. John sees in his vision the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. He sees the 'new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God'. And he then hears 'a loud voice from the throne saying,

'See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.' (Rev 21.1-4)

May we have the strength, like Mary Magdalene, to weep at the things of this world that should not be. And may God, in good time, reunite us like Mary with those we have loved, so that all our pain and sadness will be wiped away, and we will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.⁶

⁶ We might also ponder the words of the first verse of the hymn (NEH 174): 'Mary, weep not, weep no longer, / now thy heart hath gained its goal; / here, in truth, the Gardener standeth, / but the Gardener of thy soul, / who within thy spirit's garden / by his love hath made thee whole.'