

What Easter Gives Back To Us

Text: St. John 20:1-17

"Jesus said, 'Mary!' She turned to Him and said, 'My Master!' "

As Easter approaches, I want to talk to you about what someone has called the greatest recognition scene in all literature: that between Mary Magdalene and Jesus in the Garden of the Resurrection.

Nobody loved Jesus more than Mary did. He knew her love for Him. He said that having been forgiven much, she loved much. She had good reason to love Him because He had loved her into a higher life. She is described as "a woman who was living an immoral life." But that seldom is the whole story about people. Immoral though we are, we still have longings and aspirations after goodness and beauty. One day her hunger led her to His feet where she saw all that her true self longed for. She washed His feet with her tears and wiped them with the hairs of her head; and when she had done so, she heard from His lips words that meant her life would never be the same again, "Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace." Kahlil Gibran has Jesus speaking to Mary, "You have many lovers, but I alone love you. Other men have loved themselves in your nearness, I love you in yourself. Other men see a beauty in you that shall fade sooner than their own years. I see a beauty in you that shall not fade away, and in the autumn of your days that beauty shall not be afraid to gaze at itself in the mirror and it shall not be offended. I alone love the unseen in you." And Mary adds, "On that day the sunset of His eyes slew the dragon in me and I became a woman."

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face.

No wonder she loved Him! And then on Good Friday it seemed it was all over. She could have said on Good Friday what she said on Easter Sunday, "They have taken away my Lord." The Master whom she loved, who was her life, was crucified, and her world became a Good Friday world. All that she loved she had lost. And then, early on Easter day, in the mists of morning she looked into His sepulchre and found it empty. Numbled by grief and half blinded by tears, she caught a glimpse of Him but mistook Him for the gardener. Her anguished words asked Him to tell her, if he had taken away her Lord, where he had laid Him. And then Jesus said, "Mary!"

What's in a name? A whole world of life and beauty is in a name when it is spoken like that. No one ever spoke her name as He spoke it, and suddenly she moved to the other side of darkness, from a Good Friday world into an Easter world, from evening to morning, and everything she had lost was given back to her.

Easter gives back to us everything that Good Friday takes from us. It is Jesus Himself, and in having Him restored to us we move from the night of dereliction to the morning of God's laughter. But what does it mean to say that on Easter morning He is given back to us?

What Easter Gives Back To Us

I. He gives Himself back to us and in so doing He gives us eternal life.

Indeed, He not only gives us eternal life, He declares its nature to be a loving relationship with Himself. Jesus spoke her name, "Mary!" and she said, "My Master!" With those words, the love they had for each other was fresh and new again but with this difference: it was now a love that had passed through death undiminished. It was the love of Christ reaching her from the other side of death, and what is that but eternal life? In speaking her name He declared to Mary what He declares to each of us, that He is ours forever, that He holds us to Himself so closely that not even death can part us. And that is to declare that eternal life is a loving relationship with Himself.

As soon as we forget this, eternal life loses its quality. It becomes nothing more than endless life, a quantity of time rather than a quality of relationship. Indeed, it loses any quality that would make it desirable. Who would wish for mere endlessness without quality? It would be something to escape from, not something to be coveted.

H. L. Mencken once declared with characteristic frankness that endless life was nothing more than sheer egotism going on for ever and ever. He asserted that he neither believed it nor wanted it. Huxley pointed out with irresistible candor that many of those who desire immortal life are at a loss to know what to do with themselves on a wet Sunday afternoon. One of our poets suggests that endless life might be like waiting for ever in a railway station for a train that never comes. When there is no quality, eternal life is not worth having, and what gives it its quality is a loving relationship.

We prove this in small ways. How long is an hour? Well, it all depends who you're with, doesn't it? Eternal life is not endlessness. Eternal life is a loving relationship with Jesus Christ, and it is the quality of His friendship that defines its nature.

Again, when we forget that eternal life is a loving relationship with Christ, the value of the individual is easily lost. Some religions teach that when we die, the self is not lost but becomes part of a larger whole, rather like a drop of water dropping into a pail of water. The self is still there, but can no longer be separated and recognized as an individual self. But to be no longer a center of self-awareness, to lose the sense of oneself as a heart of love that can be linked in love with other hearts, is to have less there than we have here. It is to envision an eternal life in which we have less personal reality and poorer personal relationships than we enjoy now.

When we lose our self-awareness, and our awareness of others, we have lost ourselves and them. Dylan Thomas failed to see this. He wrote a magnificent poem called "And Death Shall Have No Dominion." In it, he declares that death shall have no dominion because, "while lovers be lost love shall not." It sounds not only defiant, but triumphant. Then we remember that if lovers be lost death has dominion enough, for there is no love when all lovers perish. How can love not be lost if Tom is lost who loves Mary, and if Margaret is lost who loves George? If Jack loses his Jill there is no comfort in telling him that death has no dominion. Losing his dear love, he has lost everything! Caitlin, the wife of Dylan Thomas, affirmed the truth of this after her

What Easter Gives Back To Us

husband's death in New York City. She wrote a book and called it *Leftover Life To Kill*. When she lost her Dylan, death had proved its dominion.

If we declare the nature of eternal life by saying it is a loving relationship with Jesus Christ, then we are saying it is not something that begins when we die but a quality of life we may have here and now. All the leaves of the New Testament are rustling with this news. Eternal life is ours already if we know and love Christ. The love that claims us from the other side of death by speaking our name is the love that invites us to His friendship now. Having Him, we have eternal life.

One of the men who most influenced Henry Emerson Fosdick of Riverside Church was a Quaker theologian and philosopher called Rufus Jones. Years ago he went to England to preach and lecture. While he was in England his son in America died. There were no jet planes then to thrust him back to North America in a few hours. Rufus Jones could not get home for his son's funeral. On the day of the funeral his friends in England marvelled at his grace and serenity, and told him so. He replied that the secret of his calm was massively simple. All their life his son and he had loved and been loved by Jesus Christ. The Christian hope of Rufus Jones for his son was the conviction that "where there is so much love there must be more."

That is what Mary discovered. Christian hope is the love of God. It affirms that where there is so much love, there must be more. The love of Christ will not allow even death to separate us from Him. P. T. Forsyth, one of the greatest of theologians, tells us that eternal life is very simple: What it means is that there is a life with Jesus here, and there is a life with Jesus there. That is the quality of it and that is why we want it. He gives us Himself, and not only gives us eternal life but declares the nature of it.

II. He gave Himself back to them, and in giving them Himself He gave them themselves.

It wasn't simply that Easter gave Jesus back to the disciples. They discovered that having Him meant they had recovered their own selves.

Jesus had defined them. He had not only called them, He had given them a calling. They were His disciples, discovering who they were by their relationship with Him. He had kindled their faith. He had made them fishers of men, had sent them forth in His name and given them a Gospel to preach. And then, suddenly, this Man who held their life's meaning in his own Being was taken away from them, and that was the end. It wasn't simply that they had lost Him, it was that in losing Him they had lost themselves. In a profound sense, the best that was in them died when He was crucified, and they no longer knew who they were, for they had known themselves only in Him.

A newspaper editor in England once asked his daughter who worked for him to write an article about David Livingstone, the Christian medical missionary to Africa. The editor had no sympathy with David Livingstone's faith, so he told his daughter to write the article without mentioning it. She went off to do all the research necessary for the article, but soon returned to tell her father that what he had asked her to do

What Easter Gives Back To Us

was impossible. She said that her article would not only mention Livingstone's religion, but would make it its major interest, for David Livingstone could not be explained apart from his faith. It defined him, making him what he was and giving him his life's work. What he did, he did for love of Christ.

All Christians would wish to make a similar claim. For all our failure to be like Him, we are still inexplicable apart from Him. Any good that is in us, any depth we possess, we owe to Him. Anything that is lovely, or true, or gracious in us has come to us from His grace by His graciousness. Without Him I do not know who I am or what I ought to be. He has shaped my attitudes from within. He tells me who I am.

Some of us may feel like resisting the truth of this, for it seems that if we affirm it we have handed ourselves away, defining ourselves in terms of someone else. Yet something of the same is true of our friends and dear ones. Our friends make us what we are, each one winning from us a unique response and bringing us alive in his or her own unique way. I am never exactly the same in my response to any two friends, not because my personality is unstable, but because each person I love calls to life a different part of me. That is what we mean when we talk about the uniqueness of human personality. Each unique person wins from us a unique response. That is why we cannot talk lightly about personal uniqueness, because when we lose that unique person, it is not simply that they die, it is that the bit of us they brought alive perishes with them. When we weep for our beloved dead, we weep not only for them, but for ourselves. That is why John Donne exhorts us not to ask for whom the funeral bell tolls; it tolls for us. Each person's death diminishes me, for the part of me they made alive dies with them.

If you have lost a dear one you will know the truth of this. A friend of mine in my London church once talked to me about her husband who had died, and whom I had buried. She said, "He gave me my place." And knowing him, I know he would have been eager to say the same thing of her. Our friends give us our place. Some of us may like to think that we are more independent than that, but why should we wish to be? Should we be more genuinely human if we could say that we do not need our friends? If we do not need our friends we are not more truly human, we are more poorly adjusted and more deeply impoverished. My dependence on those I love is not an expression of weakness but a self-affirming reality. I couldn't live a week without the love and trust, the acceptance and companionship of my friends.

That is how the disciples felt about Jesus, and why they were devastated by His death. He had promised them, "I will not leave you comfortless," and the word He used meant that He would not allow them to be orphaned. But it seemed that soon after He made His promise, He broke it. They were orphaned, they were bereft when their master was crucified. Suddenly the One who had given their life any meaning it had was gone. Now they were servants without a Master, disciples without a Teacher, evangelists without a Gospel. And then on Easter Sunday morning He fulfilled His promise by giving Himself back to them, and in so doing gave back to them their own life. Notice the difference it made to them once they knew that their beloved Master was alive. After His crucifixion they had huddled together in fear; but now, in the

What Easter Gives Back To Us

words of their enemies, they "turned the world upside down," which just means that they put it right way up.

That is why the evidence for our Lord's resurrection is not merely the New Testament account of it. The best evidence for the resurrection is that there is a New Testament, that there was a community to produce it, that there was a faith to produce the community and men and women to preach that faith. And they did so only because when Jesus gave Himself back to them, He gave them back themselves and their faith. They rediscovered their courage and went on with their Master's ministry of reconciliation. That is the second thing, and it brings us to the third and last.

III. In giving them Himself He gave back to them their own beloved dead.

It is Paul who puts the matter simply and clearly when he tells the Corinthians that if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then those who have fallen asleep in Him have perished. But being raised from the dead He has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

When archaeologists began to examine Roman cemeteries, they found seven letters inscribed on many tombstones. They were the letters N F F N S N C. The words the letters stood for were so well known that they didn't have to be written in full; the letters were enough to declare their message. The words, of course, were Latin, and their meaning declared, "I was not, I was. I am not, I care not."

Imagine writing on a tombstone, "I care not." I can understand a person saying of himself that he didn't care whether he lived or died; I have heard people say that. There have been times and moods when most of us have felt like that. But I cannot understand anyone saying it of someone they love. Archaeologists went into the tomb of one of the Pharaohs and they found a sarcophagus containing the mummified remains of a little child and a message the child's mother had left with her little one. She had written, "O my life, my love, my little one, would God I had died for thee!" I don't care? Prince Andre in *War And Peace*, tells us that what convinces us of eternal life is not any argument; it is just that we go through life hand in hand with someone and then suddenly that someone is taken away from somewhere into nowhere, and we stand looking down into emptiness and the abyss.

But our dear ones, however deeply we love them, do not return from the abyss. Our heart breaks for their loss, but they do not come back. They have entered that country from whose bourn no traveller returns. Death gives back nothing it has taken.

When W. B. Yeats was an old man he found a bleached bone on the shore and made it speak. It said, "Death, give back to me three things. Give me the little one who found satisfaction and rest at my breast. Give me back the man who found his fulfillment in loving me, and give me back the man whom I loved and adored." But death doesn't give anything back.

Let me speak to you the saddest words, I think, in literature. They are in King Lear. Do you remember Lear weeping for dear Cordelia, his daughter, who is dead, and lamenting that a dog, and a horse, and a rat have life and Cordelia has no breath in

What Easter Gives Back To Us

her? And he weeps, "Thou'lt come no more, never, never, never, never, never!" There is a sob of heartbreak and desolation in every repeated word that tolls like a funeral bell.

When Mencken asserted that egotism is the root of our desire for eternal life, he was wrong. It is not egotism but love that demands it. It is not simply that I cannot bear that you should perish; it is that there is in you such grace, wisdom and goodness that you ought not to perish. If you do, then death mocks the highest and best we have loved and known by depriving us of them for ever. But when Jesus says, "Mary!" and gives Himself back to her, in that gift He gives back to us all our dear ones who have fallen asleep in Him.

About 450 years before Christ, Euripides wrote *Alcestis*. It is a play about Alcestis, a young and beautiful queen who dies willingly for her husband, the King. Heracles, the Greek Samson, comes to the king's court and learns that this dear, loving wife is dead, and that the King is broken by grief. So Heracles asks where the dark valley is that holds her, for he will go and wrestle with death to recover the woman so deeply loved by so many. And so he does. The most powerful scene in the play is that in which Heracles comes into the King's presence, accompanied by a white veiled form and addresses the King: "Look, O King, if there be aught here that seems to thee like unto thy wife, then step forth from grief to bliss." Then he removes the veil and there is Alcestis in all her radiant beauty. Heracles declares, "Here, O King, I give her back to thee."

That is just an old play, but there is another story that is nearly as old and it is much more than a play. It is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ who is our Champion in the Field. It is Christ who speaks one name in a garden, and in speaking that name speaks your name and the names of those whom you have loved long since and lost awhile, and whom you have never stopped loving, and for whom you constantly pray with all the longing of your soul. And speaking their names and ours He gives them back to us, that we may step forth from grief to bliss.

I wish you could have met Mrs. Bunting. When I knew her she was over eighty. She lived in the little seaside resort and fishing village of Donaghadee on the coast of County Down, Northern Ireland. Mrs. Bunting was old when I knew her, and she was getting ready to die. She said to me, "Mr. Boyd, I am not afraid to die because I have a claim in heaven." I asked her to tell me about it and she replied, "When I was very young I had a little baby girl, and she died when she was very small. But I have never stopped loving her. My love has followed her into the great beyond and stayed with her all through the years. I am not afraid to die because I have a claim in heaven. A little bit of myself is already there."

You have a claim in heaven, don't you? Some of those whom you love more than you love your own life are there, and they are your claim. And Jesus is there, and He is our claim. He is our claim because in His great love He has claimed us by speaking our name as once in the garden He spoke Mary's. And in speaking it, He gives us Heaven.