

# *Beyond Damage Control*

## *John 20:11-18 (with Acts 10:34-43)*

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Christ is risen, and Mary is weeping. Mary Magdalene looks into an empty tomb, and she can only think the worst. Someone has taken the body. Under usual circumstances, of course, she would be right. It is a truism to say that just when you think things cannot get worse, they do. You lose your job, and then someone in the family gets sick. You lose your job, someone gets sick, and then a tree falls onto the roof of your house. It is raining when the tree falls, and the gash in the roof provides a conduit that the water likes better than the rain gutters. Just when you think things cannot get worse, they do.

This sort of thing can go on for a while. I remember once having to read the book of Job all the way through for a class, forty-two chapters of Job complaining about his lot, documenting his troubles, declaring his innocence, forty-two chapters of Job's friends saying pious, blaming, and just annoying things in the name of friendship and good advice. After about 14 chapters of this, you want to say, "Enough already," and you still have 28 chapters to go. The book is exhausting. Someone mentioned this feature of the story to our instructor. He responded to all of us youngsters in the class by saying, "Look, it's the book of Job: you're supposed to be sick of it before you're done with it. The medium is the message, and part of the message here is that life is exhausting sometimes, especially when you're sick or grieving."

That Sunday morning in the garden, Mary was grieving. Women, like men, followed Jesus during his ministry. Some of the women among his followers provided for him from their own wealth. All the gospels mention that women followers of Jesus kept vigil during the crucifixion and watched to see where the body was laid. Mary was there.

She had been there also when rumors of an arrest began to circulate. With others who followed Jesus, she would have hoped that Jesus would escape danger somehow. After all, Jesus had been threatened at other times in his ministry and had been able to melt into the crowd and walk to safety. But this time he did not escape.

After Jesus was arrested, Mary could hope that the authorities only wanted to scare him. Maybe they would settle for a beating and not an execution. Maybe they would just detain him until after the festival. They might let him go after the crowds at Passover had left Jerusalem and the threat he posed to good order in the temple and in the Roman province was past. But then came the order for crucifixion. At the crucifixion, she would have been praying for some judgment of God, some mercy, some miracle to free Jesus from the torture. Finally, though, the only mercy forthcoming was a death that took hours rather than days to claim him.

When we catch up with Mary on Sunday, it is hard to imagine how things could get worse. And then they do. The body is missing, and a stranger is imposing himself upon her grief with the ridiculous question, "Why are you weeping?" I imagine Mary thinking, "Why am I weeping? How much time do you have? How much do you really want to know? Things just keep getting worse and worse."

Of course, she does not say any of that. Whatever Mary is thinking or feeling in

response to the question about why she is weeping, she says only, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” It is as if she had said, “Look, I just do not want anything worse to happen. Let me have the body, and my friends and I will find a way to give it a proper burial.”

Mary embodies for us the move from hope to horror to damage control. A week before, as Jesus entered Jerusalem, Mary and the others had dared to hope for the Rule of God inaugurated on earth. Then she watched in horror as he was crucified and died. Now in the garden, she wants only to make sure her loved one’s body is not further desecrated in death. Hope, horror, damage control.

If you hope for something as fervently as Mary had hoped for a different ending to Friday, and then you see the worst possible scenario unfold before your eyes, come Sunday morning you are probably not interested in hoping for anything at all. Mary looked into an empty tomb and turned away weeping. Mary looked at Jesus and could think only about how quickly a missing corpse could be located.

After my dad died of cancer, my mom responded to people’s condolences by saying, “He was in so much pain at the end. I couldn’t wish him back the way he was.” It was true of course. At the end, no one wanted my dad’s life to continue as it was, but that truth begged more questions than it answered. Why cancer in the first place? Was it too much to hope that Dad might have lived a healthy retirement alongside Mom for ten or fifteen years past his sixtieth birthday? By the time Dad had endured cancer and its treatment for five years, Mom was way past hoping for anything except that the horror of his being eaten from the inside out would cease and that she would learn to live alone, and so she said, “I couldn’t wish him back the way he was.”

Damage control offers the comfort that maybe at least the worst is over. And when the choices in this world are between unchecked damage and damage control, then trying to make the best of a terrible situation is exactly the right thing to do. Parents going through a divorce struggle to minimize the damage to their kids. People who are grieving comfort themselves with the reminder that their loved ones are no longer in pain. Political enemies agree to grumbling compromises and fragile cease-fires. This is the fine, noble work of damage control.

The resurrection of Jesus, however, testifies to the fact that God’s will for creation extends beyond such work. When Mary pleads to be told where the body is, the risen Jesus says simply, “Mary.” Jesus calls her by name, and she can see him. She hears his voice and realizes her teacher is standing there beside her. Beyond damage control is life from the dead.

At that point, Mary must have hugged Jesus because the next line in the text is, “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.” He has work to do, and so does she. Jesus sends her to the others. With the message that he gives Mary for the other disciples, Jesus reminds me of a kid who brings his friends home after school. The house, the food, the video games, all of them are shared as if the kids all belonged to the same family. Like that kid bringing his friends home, Jesus opens up the relationship he has with God to all of those with him. “Go to my brothers,” Jesus says, “and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” The relationship that Jesus has with God is open now to everyone Jesus brings home.

The resurrection of Jesus brings one experience after another that looks less like damage control and more like life from the dead. Jesus gets his life back. Then Mary

gets *her* life back as she recognizes him. Then she carries the news to the others. By Easter evening, instead of suffocating from guilt and fear behind locked doors, the little band of disciples is breathing in the Holy Spirit given by Jesus himself.

After that, it begins to look like God just has this thing for empty tombs and open doors. Eventually God opens the door to the home of the Roman centurion, Cornelius, and through that open door walks the Jewish fisherman, Simon Peter. Peter finds himself saying to Cornelius and his household, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34f). Before Easter, neither Mary’s witness to new life nor Peter’s would have made sense. After Easter, they begin to.

I say that these witnesses to new life *begin* to make sense because I know that the reality of resurrection in our lives is seen, as the apostle Paul would say, “through a glass darkly.” There is much to obscure our vision of life from the dead. I think of Mary Magdalene there right beside the risen Jesus yet not able to recognize him, obscured as he was by her tears. The new life of the risen Christ takes shape in the still-contested world in which he was killed.

Nonetheless, Mary testifies simply, “I have seen the Lord!”

Are you perhaps not there yet, at the clarity Mary has by the end of the gospel reading? When you and I are living closer to Mary’s tears than her testimony, when we are skeptical about the great victory that the Easter hymns proclaim, we are in exactly the same place where the followers of Jesus found themselves after his crucifixion. Part of the joy of this day is that nothing about the reality of the resurrection depends on whether we can honestly hope for it or not. In fact, Easter marks an event greater than anything Mary Magdalene or Peter or you or I could *possibly* have hoped for. Yet here it is: beyond damage control God brings life from the dead—for Jesus, for Mary, for Peter, for Cornelius and his whole household, for you and me. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!