

Turning Tears of Sadness into Tears of Joy

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24; John 20:1-18

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The White Lily is the title of a short story for Easter by Jane Tyson Clement. The story is about an old peasant named Ivan, who lived in a little hut beside a small garden. Ivan's orphaned nephew, Peter, who was six years old, lived with him. They had a dog named Rubles. Ivan wasn't exactly a bad man. He didn't murder, steal, lie, or meddle in other peoples' business. But he wasn't exactly a good man either. He was cruel and dirty. He was unpleasant with his neighbors, mean to Peter, and Rubles, the dog, was afraid of his own master and never went near him.

Over the years young Peter had grown silent because he was never spoken to except in anger. He had no friends and was too shy to speak to anyone. He feared his uncle Ivan.

Add to this filth. The little hut was brown and bleak, the windows grimy and stained, the walls covered in cobwebs. Beds were never made, scraps of food were left out, and mud was tracked throughout the house. Indoors and out, it was a filthy little hut. And so were they. Poor Peter wore rags. He was so filthy you could hardly see the little boy beneath all the grime. Ivan's black hair and beard were unkempt. His clothes were black with age and hardly ever washed. He looked terrifying.

According to the story, one day Ivan had to go to town to buy some beans. As he returned home, he met a stranger, a young, tall man with a shepherd's staff. In one arm the young man carried white lilies, lilies so beautiful they glowed and dazzled the eyes. Normally Ivan would not speak to a stranger. He would just pass by in his usual gruff manner. But this day Ivan stopped in his tracks and stared.

The stranger spoke first. "Good day, friend," he said. Ivan continued to stare. The stranger spoke again, "What is it you see?"

When Ivan looked up at the stranger's face, the light of his face was as bright as the lilies. He said, "Those flowers ... I never saw any so fair."

"One of them is yours," the stranger said.

"What do you want for it? I am a poor man," Ivan said cautiously.

"I want nothing in return, only that you should keep the flower clean and pure," he said.

Ivan wiped his dirty hands on his clothes, took the white lily and carefully carried it home. He and Peter quickly and excitedly found a vase to put the lily in. They decided the little hut was too dirty to house such a beautiful lily, so they cleaned and cleaned. They looked at each other and knew that they were too dirty to care for the lily, so they bathed and put on clean clothes. They even bathed Rubles, the dog, and combed out his fur.

They invited neighbors to come and see the beautiful, glowing lily. Everyone was taken by the beautiful white lily.

For seven days the lily glowed and gleamed on the windowsill, and everything around it—the house, Ivan and Peter, the neighbors, even the dog—was transformed. Then on the seventh day it vanished. It was gone. They searched, but the white lily could not be found. And then Ivan looked at Peter's face and thought, "The lily grows there still." Here's how the story ends,

When they saw the clean pure house, and spoke with love to each other, and greeted their neighbors, and tended the growing things in the new garden, each thought to himself, 'The lily still lives, though we see it no longer.'

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That's Easter! That is what we gather to celebrate this morning. The resurrection of Jesus still lives, still transforms everything around it, even though we see it no longer. Easter is a power that transforms our

filthy little huts, our disgruntled natures, and our broken world. As surely as spring is bringing our earth back to life with flowers and new, green growth, the message of Jesus' resurrection brings you and me back to life.

The first time it happened was in another garden. A despondent, brokenhearted woman named Mary Magdalene wept tears of sadness. Never has there been a friend truer than Mary Magdalene. According to John's account of the resurrection morning, Mary was the only woman to go to the tomb. Mark identifies four women who went to the tomb, Matthew two. Luke says simply "they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared." According to John though, Mary was the only one to pay final respect to the one who had meant so much to them all. What a loyal friend! Her tears of sadness were the result of her discovery. According to John, what she found that morning was not an empty tomb, but that the large stone blocking the entrance to the tomb had been moved. According to the text, she didn't look into the tomb until later. Instead she immediately ran to tell Peter and John, probably assuming grave robbers had taken the body of Jesus. That was something they did back then. People broke into tombs and stole gold and jewels and other valuables buried with a body. Mary must have been thinking, "As if what they did to him on Friday wasn't enough, now they have stolen his body!" This was insult upon injury!

After Mary told Peter and John, she made her way back to the garden and to the tomb. John says she stood outside the tomb weeping. Neither of the other gospel writers says anything about Mary nor anyone else weeping. They speak of them being afraid, terrified, and alarmed, but only John writes of the heavy grief that produces weeping. Four times, in fact, John refers to her weeping. Remember what he told them on Thursday night? These were some of his parting words on the night before the crucifixion,

Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn...you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.

Two angels spoke to Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

“They have taken away my Lord,” she lamented. Notice she still did not believe a resurrection had occurred. She assumed “they,” grave robbers, had taken Jesus’ body.

Jesus was standing nearby. Seeing her grief, he asked her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?”

Thinking him to be the gardener, Mary said to Jesus, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Really? How? How would she carry a body alone? But she was willing to try. Still she did not believe a resurrection had occurred.

That’s when it happened. One word. Her name. Jesus said to her, “Mary!”

John says that she turned to the “gardener” and said in the Hebrew language, “Robbouni!” It’s a word that means “teacher.” Mary realized the one standing before her was Jesus, not the gardener. She apparently grabbed hold of him, probably hugging him uncontrollably, because Jesus responded to her, “Do not hold onto me, because I have not ascended to the Father.” Jesus told Mary to go and tell “my brothers,” which she did. Here’s her message to them. Just five words: “I have seen the Lord.”

Mary Magdalene was the first preacher, the first evangelist, the first to tell the good news.

Moments before Mary was weeping tears of sadness. She was overcome by grief. Some unscrupulous grave robber had stolen the body of her dearest friend. But the tears of sadness were transformed into tears of joy by the good news of the resurrection.

So here’s the question we have to answer all these years later. Does the resurrection still live, even though we see it no longer? Is there still something in this ancient story that has the power to transform everything around it? Yes! That is the good news of this Easter morning. The resurrection lives on, and I see it in some of your faces. Let us take this gift that is given to us, this beautiful white lily, and transform the darkness and filth of the world.

Today is Easter. The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!
Let us live in the transformative light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ!

Closing Prayer

Blessed Risen Lord, we celebrate you, who was in the beginning,
who lived among us, who was crucified, died, and buried, and who now
reigns forever as our resurrected Lord. Amen.