

Tuesday of Easter Week – April 14, 2020
St. Mary's Catholic Church, Richmond VA
Fr. Michael A. Renninger

It was a beautiful day in March of 2001. Hundreds of us had gathered at Mount Calvary Cemetery for a burial. The Funeral Mass was celebrated at the Cathedral that morning. Now we were at the cemetery, to say goodbye to one of my heroes... Msgr. Charles Kelly.

He was a great preacher. A talented eater of pasta. An amazing priest. And now he was gone. Cancer.

I had not let myself cry. After his death, I stayed busy handling some of the details of the funeral services.

But then, we reached the end of the prayers at the cemetery. Charlie's casket was lowered into the ground, while we sang, "And I will raise you up."

Then, it was over. I stood there. And for the first time, I gave myself permission to feel the overwhelming sense of loss, of anger, of absence, of confusion, of hopelessness... all of which was swirling inside of me.

And, for the first time since Charlie died, I started to cry. No, that's not the right word. I started to *weep*. I could not catch my breath.

And then, someone put his arm around me and pulled me to himself. I knew it was a man because my nose was dripping onto his tie. But I did not know who it was... my eyes were closed, my heart was broken. And when I did open my eyes I could not see anything clearly... my vision was blurry, because my eyes were full of tears.

I was *not* alright. I needed to cry, in the embrace of someone I could not see at that moment, because my eyes were full of tears.

I don't know how long we stood there, but at some point the fellow who was hugging me simply said one word: "Michael." And as soon as I heard his voice, as soon as I heard the way he said my name, I knew who it was. Before I could see him clearly, I could tell who it was by the sound of his voice.

It was a dear friend from the Cathedral, a retired gentleman who was a lector at the church. When I heard his voice, I knew who it was. I could breathe again. And the tears subsided just enough so that I could look up at him, I could see him, and I could say “thank you.”

On this Tuesday in the Octave of Easter, we read a poignant passage from John’s Gospel. And I want to confess to you that, for years, when I read this passage, I wondered how was it possible that Mary of Magdala could not recognize the risen Jesus as he stood right in front of her.

I often thought, “If my grandmother or mother came back from the dead and stood in front of me, I would recognize them right away!

Jesus loved Mary of Magdala. And she loved him. Jesus had given her hope. She followed him and was dedicated to his message about the Reign of God.

She was so dedicated that, on Sunday morning after that terrible Friday on which Jesus had died, Mary went to the tomb... maybe to anoint him. Maybe to just be near the last spot where she had seen him alive.

What she found was confusing. The large stone rolled away from the entrance of the tomb.

Peter and the others came to investigate. And Mary... Mary sat a few feet from the entrance of the tomb. Weeping. In fact, Mary’s tears were so overflowing that John tells us that she was weeping THREE times in just a few verses.

The Risen Lord stands before Mary... and at first she thinks he’s the gardener. Mary’s life had been changed by the love of Jesus. So how could she possibly not recognize him? Well, maybe she could not see him clearly, because her eyes were full of tears. Maybe that weeping – which was mentioned three times – filled her eyes with so many tears that she could not see him clearly, even though he was right in front of her, loving her.

And notice... as soon as she hears his voice say her name, she understands. She understands who it is, she understands he is there, he is risen, he is living.

Maybe her weeping is transformed to tears of joy. Now that she hears his voice and sees his face, the healing begins. And she understands that *she* has a ministry and mission, to go forth and announce the good news of resurrection.

Mary’s tears happened at Easter. And, during THIS Easter week, many of us have tears in our

eyes. I think of the families who have experienced the death of a loved one in recent weeks – whether it's from the Corona virus, or some other medical issue. Every death is hard. And now we cannot even celebrate funerals the way we normally do. Tears.

I think of elderly people who are isolated right now. They cannot go out. Their grandchildren cannot come to visit. Tears.

I think of families impacted by the closing of businesses. People wondering how they will feed their families if this goes on much longer. Tears.

I think of health care workers, first responders and their families. Lots of exhausted people who are scared of getting infected and yet they still show up for work every day. Tears.

I think of parents who wake up in the middle of the night, anxious about the safety of their family. Tears.

And I think of some of the people who drove through our parking lots on Palm Sunday to receive their blessed palms. As I greeted them – from a safe distance – they had tears in their eyes. Tears because they are hungry for the Eucharist. Tears because they miss their brothers and sisters in the parish community. Tears because this whole situation is just so odd, so baffling, so scary.

Is everything falling apart? Is there hope?

I felt that way at Mount Calvary cemetery on that sunny day in 2001. Mary of Magdala felt that way at the tomb in Jerusalem. Tears. Weeping.

On this Tuesday of Easter, we are invited to embrace this truth. As our eyes fill with tears, there is, in fact, someone who embraces us without saying a word. And he is there – maybe not wearing a tie. He is there - wearing the scars which show us where the nails went into his hands, and the lance went into his side.

When we have tears in our eyes, the one who embraces us is Jesus... even if we cannot see him... even if we don't recognize him... even if we are not sure who is giving us the strength to get through the moment... we may not see him clearly, because our eyes are filled with tears.

But he is there, he is here... and when the time is right, he will say the one thing we need to

here. He will say our name. As only he can say it. And deep within, we know that we are loved, and we have hope. We know that life and love never end.

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