

God's Answer to the Blues

John 20:1-18

Though we have been unable to gather together for worship during *Holy Week* as hoped, we know that the focus of the *Lenten Season* has directed us to walk the path to the cross and Jesus' sacrificial death there. Year after year, *Holy Week* challenges us to take a stroll out to a hill called Mount Calvary; out to the cross of Jesus, where, in the words of Max Lucado, ". . . with holy blood the hand that placed you on this planet wrote this promise: 'God would give up His only Son before He would give up on you.'" [brainyquote.com] This morning, we pick up the rest of the story because the cross of Jesus purchased our salvation and the resurrection of Jesus guaranteed it.

John 20:1-18:

"Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her." [NRSV] The Word of God for the People of God.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, today's Good News is so wondrous, so magnificent, that we sometimes struggle to wrap our heads around it. Holy Spirit, give our hearts the wisdom to receive that which our heads cannot fully understand. Risen Jesus, fill our whole lives with Your resurrection promise, Amen.

I asked you this question six years ago, but it is worthy of repeating: “Do you know how to sing the Blues?” I know that is a strange question for *Easter Sunday*, but bear with me. Back at the turn of the Twentieth Century, a new form of music arose from the cotton fields of the Deep South. This new music eventually found a home in the bars and honky-tonks on Beal Street in Memphis, Tennessee. It was sad, soulful music, based on the experiences of people who had lived hard lives. This new music style was called the Blues.

While in seminary, I had the opportunity to eat lunch at a few of the restaurants on Beal Street and on one of my excursions there, I discovered a humorous little book titled, “How to Write the Blues”. This guidebook says that contrary to popular thought, singing the Blues is not a racial thing; instead, it is about bad luck. This book goes on to say that breaking your leg while snow skiing in Aspen, Colorado, does not entitle you to sing the Blues, but losing your leg to an alligator in a Louisiana swamp does. Furthermore, you cannot wear a suit and tie and sing the Blues unless you happen to be over eighty-years-old and you slept in them. Likewise, dying in a bar fight is a Blues’ death; while dying on a tropical island while having liposuction is not. Also, according to this manual, no matter how tragic your life, if you own a laptop computer you cannot sing the Blues; maybe your big ol’ mean woman done sat down on it, it does not matter, it is not the Blues. It is all right to sing the Blues if you drive a Chevy or even a beat-up old Caddy, but forget it if you drive a Volvo, BMW, or any kind of SUV. You have a right to sing the Blues if your first name is a southern state, like Georgia; if you are older than dirt; if you are blind or if you shot a man in Memphis. You cannot sing the Blues if you have all your own teeth, no matter how old you are, or if you once were blind, but now you see or if when you shot that man in Memphis it turned out to be a flesh wound. Though this book was written decades before anyone ever heard of the ongoing pandemic, I imagine it would now say that you can sing the blues if you are lying in an Intensive Care Unit hospital bed infected by the coronavirus; perhaps a fitting song title would be, “I’ve Got the Social Distancing Blues”.

Apparently, there are a lot of restrictions on just who can legitimately sing the Blues. By anyone’s standards, however, Mary Magdalene could sing the Blues. No society babe was this woman; instead; she was the woman who had been possessed by seven demons. Obviously, her life had been hard and immediately following the death of Jesus, she was confused. Months before, she had met a Man who turned her life around. Jesus gave her hope, dignity, and unconditional love, but now He was gone, crucified like a common criminal. That first *Easter* morning, Mary Magdalene could do nothing but moan, nothing but sob, nothing but sing the Blues.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, could sing the Blues as well, after all; she had lost her Son to a lynch mob. It seemed like only yesterday when Jesus was lying in a manger looking up at her with helpless and loving eyes. She had nursed Him, changed Him, taught Him to walk and play. She saw how, even as a Boy, Jesus impressed the wise men in the

Temple with His wisdom and His knowledge of the Scriptures. She saw Him become a Man and what a Man He was; gentle with children, a spellbinding communicator, able to reach out and heal people with His touch. Mary's heart had once burst with pride over her Son, but then the crowd turned against Jesus and instead of allowing Him to live a respectable life, like other men of talent and ability were allowed to live, they put Him before Pontius Pilate for a mockery of a trial. The shouts of the people crying "Crucify Him!" must have pierced Mary's soul and her heart broke as she looked up at her Son hanging among thieves on a cross. Surely, if any woman who ever lived had the right to sing the Blues it was Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Women were not the not the only ones who could sing the Blues, men like Simon Peter could also sing the Blues. He let down his best Friend, the one Man in the entire world who believed in him. Did Simon believe in Jesus? Yes, but ever more important, Jesus believed in Peter; in fact, the Master called Him a rock and said that He would build His Church on Simon Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God. Simon could not believe his ears, yet for all Jesus' kind words, Peter knew he was not really that strong. The Master knew it too, for it was He who foretold that Simon would deny Him three times before the cock crew. Someday Peter would be a rock for the Early Church, but right then, he knew that he had come up short; he let down the one Man who truly loved him. Nothing for this would-be rock to do but sing the Blues.

None of the people who knew Jesus could sing the Blues like Judas Iscariot. He did not shoot a man in Memphis; he did worse than that, he betrayed the Son of God and he did it with a kiss. Heaven help Judas Iscariot, but Judas would not accept heaven's help; instead, he took the coward's way out and hung himself, most probably while singing the Blues.

Without question, the two nights preceding that first *Easter* morning were a time for singing the Blues. If any Blues' singers had been present, they would have been singing, "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?" When Jesus died on the Cross of Calvary, all the earth was covered with darkness. Denial, betrayal, broken hearts, and broken dreams were the topics of the songs being sung by His followers. **". . . we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel."** [Luke 24:21, NIV], the travelers to Emmaus said, but they had seen Jesus with their own eyes, with nails in His hands and feet and a spear thrust in His side. As befitting a Blues' death, their Master had been laid in a borrowed grave and those who had followed Him were now in hiding. Their grief and confusion weighed heavily upon them and all they could do was sing the Blues, but then, just before daybreak, Mary Magdalene made her way to the tomb. Even though the Roman authorities had placed soldiers at the tomb to guard against Jesus' disciples stealing His body, the stone was rolled away and Jesus' body was gone, vanished. Only the neatly folded grace clothes were left behind and then the Lord began making appearances to His followers. John tells us that Jesus first appeared to a Blues' singer named Mary Magdalene. Is that not just like God, this gracious God who takes our sins and buries them into the deepest parts of the sea never to surface

again? Is it not just like God to have the risen Christ appear first of all to a person who had once been possessed by evil spirits? If you cannot see the irony and at the same time, the beauty of the risen Christ appearing first of all to someone who once belonged to Satan, then you have never experienced grace.

The risen Christ started appearing to those who believed in Him; Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, those gathered in the upper room, and many others, and last of all, after His ascension, to the Apostle Paul. Christ appeared to those who believed in Him and in so doing, He stole something from them. Did you hear what I said? Jesus stole something from them. He stole from them the ability to ever sing the Blues because, you see, you cannot sing the Blues if you were once blind but now you see. You cannot sing the Blues when hope is restored. You cannot sing the Blues when your true love is with you once more. You can, however, sing the Blues beside the grave, but not if it is empty. The followers of the risen Jesus could no longer sing the Blues; following His resurrection, all they could do was shout for joy. The bottom line for you and me is simply this: singing the Blues is not a Christian virtue, even during a global pandemic, because if the resurrected Christ is truly at the center of our lives, then joy is inevitable. Because He lives, the characteristic mood of the Christian life is to be joy. Free people cannot sing the Blues and, if we have received the risen Christ as our Lord and Savior, we are free; free from the guilt of sin; free from the agony of death; free from the pain of separation; free from the darkness of despair and desperation; free from the fear of any health issue, including the ongoing pandemic.

Maybe you are currently singing the Blues, many people are. Life can deal with us brutally at times and we can forget our faith, forget our hope, forget our God. Maybe that is your condition this very moment. If so, I want to encourage you not to give up. Because of the empty tomb of Jesus, we know that love conquers hate, life conquers death, and light conquers darkness. Because of the empty tomb of Jesus, we know that no situation can be written off as hopeless. Just when we think we have reached the end of our rope, God reaches down a hand of support. This is the message of the Christian faith: life in Christ is stronger than Satan and his ability to destroy; in fact, life in Christ is stronger than death itself. At one time, for a short period, the followers of Jesus were singing the Blues, but soon they were singing, "Up from the grave He arose, . . . Hallelujah! Christ arose!" ["Christ Arose"] "Up from the grave He arose, . . .", if you and I know that, I mean really know that in our heart of hearts, then we cannot sing the Blues anymore. I do not know about you, but because He lives, I think it is time for us to exchange our soulful Blues for joyful hallelujahs.

Let us pray together: Heavenly Father, Lord Jesus, and most precious Holy Spirit, may we realize afresh today what the death and resurrection of Jesus means for us. Forgiveness, freedom, the ability to walk with You through this fallen world into eternity, and the inability to sing the Blues. May we always find our satisfaction in You and Your willingness to offer Yourself to us; in Jesus' name, Amen.

Receive this benediction: Believe in the risen Jesus and live accordingly by refusing to sing the Blues and instead sing God's praise; in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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Where you belong!