

Why Are You Weeping?

John 20:11-18

The story of Mary Magdalene meeting Jesus at the empty tomb is found only in John's gospel. I think Mary must have told John about it personally. Everything about this rings true to human nature as we know it. A weeping woman lingers by an empty tomb, wondering what has happened to the body of the one she loved. When Jesus suddenly appears, she doesn't recognize him. Then she grips his feet so tightly that he has to tell her to let go. The story ends with the mourner turned into a missionary, running to tell the others what she has just seen and heard.

Although Mary Magdalene plays an important role in the life of Christ, we know surprisingly little about her. She is one of at least five different women named "Mary" in the New Testament, and unless we are careful, we will get them confused. Mary Magdalene came from the village of Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. She was one of a group of women who became followers of Christ during his earthly ministry. She and the other women joined themselves to Jesus and his apostles and followed them from village to village, offering financial support and helping them in various ways. We are also told that Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary (Luke 8:2). Before she met Jesus, she was totally enslaved by demonic powers. How she got into this sad condition the Bible does not say and it does no good to speculate. But we may be certain that if one demon is terrible, seven demons must be seven times worse. No doubt her condition was well known to others. Perhaps she manifested it in such a way as to cause her to be ostracized from the rest of society.

Some people think she was the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11), but there is no evidence in the text to support that. Others suggest she was the "sinful woman" who anointed the feet of Jesus in Luke 7:36-50, but the Bible doesn't say that either. In church history she became a symbol for repentant sinners who come to Christ from very checkered backgrounds. This may in fact be true in her case, but we have no way to be certain.

This much we know. When Christ set her free, he liberated her from the evil impulses that had kept her chained figuratively and perhaps literally. She is living proof that those whom the Son sets free are free indeed. Having been liberated from demonic bondage, she said to herself (and perhaps out loud), ***"I love him for what he did for me. I will follow him wherever he goes."*** And so it came to pass that when our Lord hung on the cross, she stood nearby with Mary his mother. When they took his body down from the cross, she was there to see that awful, gory sight. When they placed him in the tomb, she was sitting on a rock ledge, watching it all happen (Matthew 27:61). On Saturday evening, after the Sabbath had concluded, she purchased spices because she hoped to anoint his dead body. (He was hastily buried on Friday in order to finish before sundown, which is why they had not finished preparing his body. Early on Sunday

morning, before the sun came up, she and the other women ventured through the darkness to the Garden Tomb, expecting to finish the job of anointing the body of Jesus. If we piece together the various accounts of Easter Sunday, it seems that Jesus rose from the dead sometime in the pre-dawn hours. There was an earthquake, the seal was broken, the stone rolled away by the angels, and Christ came out of the tomb. The soldiers were knocked unconscious and when they awoke, they fled in fear. When the women found the tomb empty, they were confused and terrified.

The angels told them that Christ had risen from the dead. They returned to tell the disciples who thought they were talking nonsense. John and Peter investigated, and when they saw the linen wrappings exactly where the body had been placed on Friday evening, they believed. They left to tell the others. At that point, Mary Magdalene returned to the tomb. She is confused, bewildered, in shock, frightened, and brokenhearted. It has not yet occurred to her that the empty tomb meant that Jesus had risen from the dead.

It has been often said that Mary Magdalene was "last at the cross and first at the tomb." This is a high honor that can be said of none of the men who followed Jesus. She was the first to see him alive and the first to hear his voice. The irony of the story is that when she saw him, she didn't recognize him. But when the truth hit home, she became the first evangelist in Christian history. Christ bestowed this great honor on her because she loved him so deeply and so devotedly.

Death is never easy to deal with. Most of the time we try to avoid it or postpone it or keep it far away from us. But sometimes death stares us in the face and we don't know what to do or how to respond. And that's why Mary was standing alone at the Garden Tomb about 6:30 a.m. on the first Easter Sunday.

"But Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, 'Woman, why are you crying?' 'They have taken my Lord away,' she said, 'and I don't know where they have put him'" (John 20:11-13).

If the tomb is empty, why is she still there?

If you've ever lost a loved one who meant more to you than life itself, you know why she was there. She had loved Jesus in life, now she loved him in death. She served him in life, now she meant to serve him in death. She was there at the tomb, alone, because death could not destroy her love.

Some of you got up this morning and remembered friends and loved ones who are not with you this year. Perhaps later you will go to a quiet cemetery and stand by a grave alone. In your heart, you may even talk to the one who is now gone and tell them again how much you miss them. If you have ever done that, you know why Mary was there. She weeps because the tomb is empty. She is weeping over an empty tomb! What should have been good news broke her heart! We say today that the empty tomb is one

of the greatest proofs of the Resurrection. Yet Mary weeps. This shows us that evidence alone will never persuade anyone. Unless the evidence is accompanied by proper understanding and an open heart, no one will be changed. Mary had all the right facts but she still jumped to the wrong conclusion. We often do the same thing. When faced with trials and unexplainable tragedy, we often weep over our circumstances, when if we had God's perspective, we wouldn't weep at all.

And consider this. If Mary had gotten her wish, we would be the ones weeping today. If she had found Jesus' body still in the tomb, we would have nothing to celebrate because Easter would not exist.

"At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. 'Woman,' he said, 'why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?' Thinking he was the gardener, she said, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him'" (John 20:14-15).

Why didn't she recognize the Lord? The text doesn't say but several answers come to mind. Certainly she was not expecting to see him at all. All of us have "contexts" in which we place our friends. Jean and I used to attend a larger church. I knew many of the people who attended the worship services, especially if they sat in the same place every Sunday. But let me run into some of those same people at the grocery store on Thursday afternoon, and I'm likely to draw a blank. They're out of context for me. Certainly Jesus was "out of context" for Mary that morning. And she had been weeping and was overcome with emotion. But the main reason seems to be that Jesus deliberately veiled his own identity much as he did with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Jesus did not want Mary to recognize him at first so that he could teach her an important truth. She had to learn that he is always present even when he is invisible to the naked eye. From this we learn that our Lord is often closest to us when we feel the most alone. Many times while going through a dark valley, we think God has abandoned us. But if only our eyes could be opened, we would see the Lord walking with us every step of the way. Just because we don't see him doesn't mean he isn't there.

Note the question Jesus asked: "Who are you looking for?" Not "What are you looking for?" That's a different question. Mary was looking for a **what**, a dead body. She was looking for **something**; Jesus pointed her to **someone**. The answer to our deepest need is not **something**, but **someone**, the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Jesus said to her, 'Mary.' She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, 'Rabboni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the

news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that he had said these things to her" (John 20:16-18).

"Mary." He still knows her name!

"Rabboni." She calls him, **"My Master!"**

Think how much emotion can be conveyed in just one word: "Father." "Mother." "Dad." "Mom." "Son." "Child." "Daughter." "Sweetheart." "Dearest." When Jesus called her name, he was conveying many things to her. "I am here. I am back from the dead. I still know you and I still love you."

She knew his voice. And he knew her name. This fact is of supreme importance. Death cannot destroy human personality. The essence of who we are passes through death undisturbed. The "real you" lives on and passes through the doorway marked "Death" to enter the great eternity that lies just beyond the threshold.

Then he says, "Do not touch me," or better, "Stop clinging to me." Perhaps she knelt down and wrapped her arms around his feet so that he would never leave: "I thought I had lost you, but now that I have you back again, I'm never going to let you go." In Jesus, Mary had found a man she could love and trust. But she was clinging to that which she must give up. Her clinging meant, "I think everything is the same as it used to be." The words of Jesus mean something like, "No, many things are different now." Very gently Jesus begins to unfold the future before her eyes.

He will soon ascend to the Father where he will take his place at the right hand of the Majesty on high. From there he will intercede for his followers and will commune with them through the Holy Spirit. He will be closer to them in the future than he has been in the past. If he stays on the earth, his ministry will be limited to the few who see him face to face. **He must ascend or we will not be saved.** He must leave the few so he can save the many, which includes all of us who follow him today. On that day Mary could touch him. Once ascended, we can all **"touch him"** through faith and prayer and worship. Mary's desire is understandable and her fear at losing him again is very human indeed. But it cannot be that way. All of life is a letting go, a releasing of those things we hold dear, a giving up and letting go of loved ones that they might fulfill God's mission. We must say goodbye to the good in order that God's best for us may come.

So Mary went and told the disciples what she had seen and heard. The Greek means literally, **"Mary came telling!"** She couldn't stop talking about her encounter with the risen Lord. The mourner has become the missionary! So it is with all who meet the risen Lord. We are called to do as Mary did—to run and tell all who will listen that we have seen Jesus! Mary has firsthand knowledge and so do we.

There is great power in the words of someone who can say, **"I was there. I saw it. I heard it. I am giving you an eyewitness account."** A Baptist church in Bangladesh was showing the "Jesus" film to an audience filled with people who had never heard the gospel before. Little children sat in front and in the aisles. The adults stood in the back.

As the story of Jesus' crucifixion unfolded, there were tears and audible gasps. As the Bengalis watched, one young boy suddenly spoke up, **"Do not be afraid. He gets up again! I saw it before."**

This is our message to a world overwhelmed with the reality of death. God has given us the answer. We can say to those who feel bewildered and heartbroken, "Fear not. Jesus Christ has come back from the dead. We have seen the Lord!"

I heard of a Muslim in Africa who became a Christian. When his friends asked him why he made that decision, he told them, "Suppose you were going down a road, and suddenly the road forked in two directions, and you didn't know which way to go. Then you saw two men at the fork, one dead and one alive. Which one would you follow? I decided to follow the man who is alive."

That is what we have done. We have followed the Man who is alive. Here's a good test that will help you know which religion to follow: Find the religion whose founder rose from the dead. That's the true religion that comes down from heaven. Only one religion meets that standard—Christianity—because only one man in history meets that qualification: Jesus Christ. **Follow him and he will lead you to heaven.**

Can you say with Thomas, "I have seen the Lord"?

Can you truly say to Jesus, "My Lord and my God"?

If you don't know Jesus, or if you aren't sure, there is no better time than Easter Sunday to put your trust in him. Here's a very simple prayer that you could pray to express the desire of your heart. If you sense God is calling you to come to Christ, and if you truly want to know him, this little prayer could change your life:

"Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner. I confess that apart from your grace, I will never go to heaven. Lord Jesus, I believe you are the Son of God. I believe you died on the cross for me. Thank you for taking my punishment and dying in my place. I believe you rose from the dead on the third day. With all my heart, I trust you as my Savior and Lord. Come into my heart and save me now. I gladly receive your gift of salvation. Amen."

Prayer isn't magic. We aren't saved by prayer; we are saved by Christ alone. But a prayer like this can express the faith that reaches out to the Lord Jesus Christ.. But if you prayed that prayer to the Lord tell someone else that you "prayed the prayer" and that Jesus is now your Lord and Savior. Share the good news with someone so that you can encourage them. Your faith will grow and your doubts will vanish as you tell others what Christ has done for you.

I close with the question Jesus asked Mary, only I would like to ask each person who hears or reads my words: Why are you weeping? The time for tears is over. The time to tell the Good News has come. **He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.**