

Why Are You Weeping?

Easter 2021 ~ John 20:1-18

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin

Loving Christ, as we come to this day, we seek your healing and your love. We seek to live once again with joy in the fulness of life. Open our hearts, we pray, to your redeeming love. Amen.

Why are you weeping? Woman, why are you weeping? The question is asked twice; pay attention.

A woman in a garden, standing at an empty tomb, weeping: for one whom she loves, weeping for all she has lost, weeping with exhaustion, depleted.

Mary Magdalene came first to the tomb, early that day. She saw that the stone had been rolled away, the tomb empty. She ran. Told the others. Simon Peter and another unnamed, whom Jesus loved; they ran back. The story recounted with such physicality, noting details. One ran faster, arrived first. One entered, one held back. One saw the linens, folded. One noticed a head-cloth, rolled. Then departed, went home.

Before Mary came and told them, they'd been hiding. After the police came to the Garden of Gethsemane and took Jesus away, the twelve had feared and fled and hid – except for Judas, who betrayed Him, and Peter who followed just long enough to deny three times even knowing the one to whom he gave his life. Then, he hid.

I recount these details because our natural human response in the face of danger or violence is always physical first. Our bodies are wise, alert; sense danger, react before we know it – ready to fight or to flee, or sometimes to freeze in fear.

The disciples had been fight-flight; crouched, locked in hiding these days past. Now sprung with news of empty tomb, they come – running, fast, faster, adrenaline pumping, hearts pounding, noting linens, muscles taught, breathless, then depart.

But it's Mary, I want to notice. The others leave. Mary stays; she remains. Present, observing, absorbing; standing present with her grief, facing head on all that's happened, the weight of her bewilderment, loss. Weeping. Why are you weeping?

It's Easter morning in the year of our Lord two thousand twenty-one. We've arrived in the garden. The tomb is empty. I daresay we've been running, running, running. Our hearts are pounding still with adrenaline and exhaustion and confusion from all that has transpired these long months past. Our bodies stretched, alert; muscles taught; we've faced challenges never imagined; we're ready to run again – right now – if necessary. Aren't we?

Our story is one of detailed physicality. We've been crouched in hiding, cut off from the world around us, fearful to draw close to those we love, lest one or the other of us cause harm. Grieving those we've lost. In too many ways, we're living these days with the taste of bile – rising turgid from within, sour taste of our capacity for racism both ancient and fresh; our capacity to inflict economic oppression, the violence of greed, and fear of perceived scarcity.

But it's Easter morning. Can we, with Mary, be still? Can we remain, breathe, and notice? If so, we may find and receive as Mary did that resurrection to new life begins as pain meets compassion; when pain receives compassion. Care, compassion and healing begin with inquiry;

curiosity in the needs of the other: tell me what happened; tell me your story. First the angels, then the risen Christ, come with inquiring hearts, meet her at the tomb: Why are you weeping?

Tell me.

They've taken away my Lord. I don't know where to turn. I don't where to find him. At first, she cannot see. But she stays. Christ calls her by name: Mary. She hears the sound of his voice, a voice like no other. Even across the centuries, we can feel her relief, the tension in her shoulders ease just a little, her elation: Rabboni! Teacher! Dear One. She weeps. With grief now? Or joy? Easter begins.

With two discoveries for Mary, and gifts for us too:

The first, "Do not hold onto me." In this, I believe Christ says, you cannot go back. You cannot go back to what was. It is time to live a new life.

In this meeting, not only does Mary see; she is seen. So it is with compassion, so it is with Christ: we are seen, anew. Mary is seen in this new light of Christ, a person seen not as we see ourselves but as God sees us. Mary, do not hold onto me; it is time now to lay hold of the wholeness that is already yours. "Long ago, Jesus had released the Magdalene from the septet of demons that haunted her. ("A demon for every day of the week," writes Kathleen Norris; "how practical, how womanly.") Now Jesus releases her again, this time from clinging to him" and to her past. (Jan Richardson)

Over the years, Mary Magdalene was seen and known with other's ideas of who she is: other titles, depictions, names. Sinner, prostitute, penitent, bride. Jesus said to her, "Mary." The tension does not ease immediately, nor should it; her body knows to be alert. She breathes her way into it. Let go the fear, let go the shame. Receive the grace. Receive my love. Receive the new life that is already yours.

And now, "Go, and tell the others."

Tell them what? I have seen the Lord. Yes, and the Lord has seen me. I am seen, now, as God sees me – beloved, beautiful, broken and whole all at once. And she did. She receives the love; she carries that love to find the others, to release them from their crouched fear, to wash clean the bile, to weave anew the delicate web of beloved community, new life with joy.

Observing Mary and the disciples, it is clear there is no one way to do this, no set plan of action; one by one, each of us. One went home, one stayed and wept, one will need to touch the wounds, another goes fishing; one waits for the breaking of the bread. In steps first halting, then fired aflame with the Holy Spirit, each will find in her or his own words, a way to say, "I have seen the Lord." And the Lord has seen me! I have been seen.

As I stop at the empty tomb, still my breathing, and consider the healing we need in this land, and the healing I need, and the ways I might bear witness to the resurrection through my own life, I remember the familiar questions posed in our baptismal covenant. Will you respect the dignity of every human being? Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons? "I will, with God's help," is the response we give.

I wonder if the questions receive new poignancy if we adjust them slightly and ask ourselves where: Where will you seek and serve Christ in all persons? Where will you strive for justice and peace? Where will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ? I invite you: host these questions as your spiritual practice in the coming season. Where? Or when? With whom will you practice resurrection?

And, a prayer for yourself: Risen Christ, let me see myself as you see me. Let me love myself as you love me. Let me delight in myself as you delight in me.

In closing: the story is told of a monastery that had fallen on hard times with just five aging monks feeling dispirited. At the edge of the forest surrounding the monastery there lived a rabbi in a little hermitage. One day the abbot of the monastery paid a visit to the rabbi. Before leaving, he asked the rabbi if he had any advice on how to restore the monastery.

“No, I am sorry. I have no advice to give. The only thing I can tell you is that the Messiah is one of you.”

When the abbot returned, the monks asked, did he have any advice? No, said the abbot, only that, “the Messiah is one of you.” The old monks pondered and puzzled what this could mean.

Could he be speaking of the abbot? Or perhaps brother Thomas? Or could it be brother Mark? It couldn't be me!

None of them were sure, but they each began to treat one another with new reverence and a bit more respect – just on the off chance. They found little ways to be kind, generous. In time, smiles shone on their faces; dignity marked their steps; laughter echoed in the halls; joy rose in their hearts.

As their spirits renewed and flourished, so did the gardens, and the townspeople began to visit once again. Visitors sensed this aura of respect and deep joy; young novices soon joined the elder brothers. The buildings were restored, and the community thrived. Thanks to the rabbi's gift, the monastery grew to be a spiritual center for all in that land. (from M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*)

As pain meets compassion, as death meets new life.

The Messiah is one of you. Happy Easter!