

“Why Are You Weeping?”

John 20:1-18

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Delmar Baptist Church

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I once pastored a church that celebrated Easter with a sunrise service. I found it to be one of those traditions that was a whole lot better in theory. Our pre-coffee cries of “He is risen!” never quite sounded convincing. Yet this morning Mary comes to the tomb “early.” We’re not told when exactly, only that “it was still dark.” Scholars debate the time, but clearly poet John’s more concerned about the timing of Mary’s heart: she stalks the darkness before dawn. Her loss is great; her grief is full. And that’s the way Easter begins. Mary arrives early so that she might mourn her beloved Jesus.

It’s important that we get straight who Mary is. This is Mary Magdalene, the woman that Hollywood (*The Last Temptation of Christ*, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, etc.) and most everyone else has depicted unfairly as either a prostitute or, at least, wild and promiscuous. Also, she’s often confused with another Mary, Mary of Bethany. You know, the sister of Martha, the one who sits at Jesus’ feet while Martha’s off trying to throw something together in the kitchen, the one who anoints Jesus’ feet with an expensive perfume. But this is all imaginative conjecture. Scripture says nothing about Mary of the seaport of Magdala being the sister of Martha or a prostitute. Instead, what Scripture tells us is even more interesting.

We’re told that Mary had seven demons cast out of her by Jesus (Luke 8:2-3). The amount, seven, indicates that she was completely broken before Jesus healed her. She could have been broken morally, or she might have been mentally or emotionally broken. We only know that she was completely done in, you might say, until Jesus came along.

A few years back author Reynolds Price wrote a memoir that touched many. He called it *A Whole New Life*. And that is exactly what he describes in the book—a whole new life. It’s his account of having cancer, having surgery, ending up paralyzed from the waist down, using a wheelchair. It could be the story of the end of his life, or at least Reynolds’s life as he loved it.

But it’s not, not by a long shot. It’s also the story of how Reynolds learned not to be confined to a wheelchair or confined anywhere for that matter. He started over. He wrote some of his best fiction during this time when his life could have been ended. And in the book, Reynolds says that one of the biggest mistakes we can make, when we are assaulted by some great trauma or tragedy, is to think that we can brush ourselves off, and go right on living the life that we lived before. The only hope for us is to say, “The old me has died. There must now be a new me, reinvented.”

Here’s one sure thing we know about Mary: she was busted flat, broken down—and then along came Jesus. He healed her and she began “a whole new life,” one in which she followed Jesus and cared for him with her own resources.

And we also know this: Scripture tells us Mary Magdalene was one of the few at the Cross when Jesus was crucified. She did not desert him. But when he was, in turn, busted flat and broken down, she was there with him. Oh, and one more thing: in the darkness before dawn on the first day of the week, John tells us that she's the one at the tomb, prepared to grieve the loss of her beloved.

I share all this with you because I think it's vitally important that we get Mary's name straight. This is not Mary of Bethany, not Mary the sister of Martha, not Mary with the reputation for being loose. This is Mary of the seaport of Magdala, the one who was completely broken before Jesus healed her, made her whole, gave her a whole new life, the one who, even now, in the darkness before dawn, is lost in grief because her Lord has been crucified, stolen away by an unjust execution of justice. Pay close attention to her because she's a major player. Did you know that next to Peter, James, John and Judas, Mary Magdalene is the most frequently mentioned follower of Jesus? (14 times in all!)

She arrives at the tomb only to discover that her Lord's body is gone from the tomb where it had been laid. Now, Mary is a devoted follower of Jesus, but she's no loony. She wasn't born yesterday. The grave's empty, the stone removed, but this is no occasion for joy. Dead bodies don't just disappear; they decompose, slowly, over time. So in this world of cause and effect, where there are rules as to what can happen and how things happen, in this closed system world, someone must have stolen Jesus' body. So she sets out to find the body and get on with grieving.

So that's exactly what she sets out to do: fix her loss in the only way she possibly knows how, with more searching and more grieving. Our passage tells us that she has three conversations, each one very similar. She runs to the disciples and tells them that "*They* have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him" (v.2, emphasis added). Peter and the Beloved Disciple run to check things out, then return home, leaving Mary alone, or so she thinks. She stands outside the tomb. In the garden she weeps. She looks inside the tomb and there are two angels. They ask, "Why are you weeping?" Again Mary says, "*They* have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (v.13). Then, finally, along comes Jesus. She cannot recognize him through her tears. He asks her the angels' question, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Mary thinks he's the gardener. She's grasping for a straw here, and says, "Look, if *you've* taken him away, just tell me where you've put him!"

Why was she weeping? Mary's grief is doubly full. The one she loved most in life has been stolen away *twice*, once by crucifixion and now this, a grave robbery. She's been cheated twice.

But why all this extra fuss over a body? I hear it all the time, from both those left behind and grieving and those who are about to die: "I don't want a lot of fuss over my body." "We don't want an open casket, no viewing, please. That's just too morbid." "Just cremate me and get on with it."

I understand—but be careful. There’s something inherently good about paying and praying our last respects. Sorrow is a big part of love. As the Bard says, “Parting is such sweet sorrow.” And much of what we say goodbye to involved the good gift of a body. We’re lying to ourselves if we think we can love a person in spirit, no matter how spiritual we try to with both death and life. We love that smile, those eyes, those hands, that touch. And so Mary weeps. She wants to find *that* body, Jesus’ body, just as we need to look into the coffin of our beloved and know that he or she is dead, but I live. This is what Mary wants and Jesus deserves. It’s natural, understandable, healthy.

But when does healthy grief turn unhealthy? When our tears become fears. When, as with Mary, we begin to sound like a broken record. When, as with Mary, we talk incessantly about our loss in terms of what *they* have stolen from us, or what *you* did to me, or how unfair *life* is, when we are always looking *out there* for some answer to our pain, when we begin to lose sight of God amidst our grief.

Today we have before us a copy of Fra Angelico’s wonderful fresco of Christ’s resurrection painted in the 15th century. Here Mary has been joined at the tomb by the other women, as depicted in the other Gospel accounts. Notice how they are only looking down, down into an empty tomb, while the risen Lord rises above their lowered heads.

Mary is right to weep; but her tears threaten to place her in dangerous waters. Notice, we’re told that *three* times she speaks of her loss—like the number seven mentioned earlier, three also speaks of completeness. So Mary’s loss is as full as it can be. She’s bordering on despair. She’s losing sight. She cannot make out that distinct light that only shines in such abject darkness. She’s beginning to forget her name. She’s beginning to lose sight of her Lord. When the risen Jesus appears to her, he’s nothing more than one more person to blame for her grief. She sees no relief, only grief. She mourns as one without hope.

But enough about Mary, why are you weeping? What have they taken from you? Your home, your husband, your 401k? Your child, your rights, your dignity? Your youth, your looks, your job? What have they taken from you that makes you feel downright, even doubly, cheated? What loss comes between you and God? Why do you weep?

As you weep, know this: Jesus is near even now. You may not recognize him, but he’s drawing near even now. And like a great Painter, he wants only to take your honest tears and mix them into a fresco of hope. And like a great Gardener, he only wants to take your honest tears and plant them like seeds to be nurtured into a new and living hope, a whole new life. And, yes, like the Good Shepherd, he comes to us when we’ve lost our way in this garden to the point that it sometimes looks like a desert. Yet he comes. As no one else does, he comes. He comes as the One who knows his own, who calls us by name. He comes as he came to Mary so long ago. He comes and calls us by our name and we know his voice. As one young seminarian once summed up the gospel: “It gets dark. It gets very dark. And then there’s Jesus.”

And that’s when we discover finally where Christ’s body is—it’s alive! Christ’s body is right here this day in the miracle of this church. *We* are Christ’s Body. Never ever count us out.

We're here for one reason only: to *em-body* Christ's living, loving presence. Jesus is alive and well, made known through this very church. Sure, we sometimes look at Jesus and only see a gardener, look at Delmar and see just another religious organization. But that's a mistake: we are Christ's body, living and alive—so do not count us out.

We have our faces, our names. And they're good names: Bob Harmon, Marylee Baygents, Marsha Hussung, Dan Murphy, Jeremy Reid, Vera Linskey—all good, all gifts, all honorable. But we take our hits and tend to forget. We hardly recognize ourselves. Till God draws near, that is. Till God's living, loving presence comes calling us by the name beneath our names, beneath all that we may appear to be to others, that name by which we are called God's beloved. That's when, like Mary, we finally get our names right.

Then, when we hear God call us by our surest, deepest names, the wasteland begins to bloom into a garden. Then the tears lose their fear. Then our closed world opens up and there's room to live and love. Then the lament "They have stolen my beloved away" turns into the levity of "I have seen the Lord." Christ is risen. Indeed. Amen.