

Woman, Why Do You Weep?

John 20:11-18

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Awake early, she pulls a cloak around her shoulders and steps out into the darkness. The air is chilly, the streets quiet except for the first few folks beginning their morning chores. The scent of smoke from nearby fires mixes with the smell of cow dung in the air. Despite the heaviness of her grief, Mary walks quickly through the dark to find the tomb where Jesus' body was left. After the trauma of his trial and crucifixion, she hopes for some time alone with him, simply to be in his presence. He had come to mean so much to her. With his promises of God's kingdom coming, his compassion for her and for all women, his desire to see justice come as the prophets promised it would one day; he was her teacher, her friend, and in many ways, her savior.

When she arrives at the cave where they left him, she is astounded to find that the huge rock which had sealed his body inside has been pushed away. Assuming his body has been stolen or taken away, she runs back to tell the disciples, and Peter and another disciple race back to see for themselves. They look inside and see the burial cloths that were wrapped around Jesus' body on the ground, but Jesus is gone!

It's not until the two men have gone back to tell the others that Mary peeks inside. Sitting where his body once was are two angels.

"Woman, why do you weep?" they ask. The question seems so strange, almost like a cruel taunt. One almost expects her to say, "Of course, I'm weeping! I have just witnessed the greatest human cruelty as I watched the person in whom I have placed all my hope, the person who made me believe there could be a better life and a better world, die a horrible death!"

We can understand her grief, her shock at what she has seen over these last few days in her life. After all, this has been another week of difficult news.

Woman, why do you weep? Because more than 6 million people have died of Covid and, once again, we hear that the case numbers are starting to climb.

Woman, why do you weep? Because all week we have seen the heart-breaking images from the war in Ukraine. A war which is brutal in its cruelty and violence. A war in which civilians, often children, are intentionally targeted and there has already been so much death and destruction.

Woman, why do you weep? Because this week yet another black man has died in an altercation with white police officers. Another family grieves the loss of someone they loved and more children are fatherless because the specter of racism hovers over everything we do in this nation.

Woman, why do you weep? Because we are tired, bone weary of the fear, the uncertainty, the seemingly endless cycle of bad news.

Yet, when asked this question, Mary's answer is so simple, so straightforward. "They have taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have laid him". And perhaps that is the greatest wound of all. After all that has happened, after all the pain she has felt, she can't be with him even after his death.

I'm pretty sure that some of us have felt that way at times over these last two years - perhaps just in the last few days. We seek for God, but God just seems to be missing, far away, or perhaps disinterested in all that is transpiring here among God's people.

Mary steps out of the tomb only to find a stranger there. She thinks it's the gardener. He, too, asks, "Woman, why do you weep? Whom are you looking for?" She wonders if he is the one who moved Jesus' body, so she says, her voice quivering with some combination of grief and fury, "Tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away".

And then comes one of the most poignant moments in all of scripture. Jesus simply says her name, "Mary", and all the grief, all the fear, her sense of being lost for having lost him, falls away. She may not recognize his face, but she knows his voice - the still, small voice of God.

He is alive! He is right with her - standing at her side! Our God, the God of covenants and faithfulness, unconditional love and endless grace, has overcome the evil of the world with the power of hope, new life, and new beginnings.

"Woman, why do you weep?" The question isn't meant as a taunt or a denial of all that Mary has seen and lost. Rather, it is an invitation to her to open her eyes, to see the miracle, and to rejoice.

So, yes, we all have reason to weep in this long season of pandemic, war, division, racism, and personal loss and grief. Our weeping is natural and right. Perhaps our doubts about God are inevitable. Yet, the promise of Easter is that God is always with us and that, ultimately, love wins, that good wins. As Pope Francis said in his Easter address at the start of the pandemic, Easter gives believers "a fundamental right that can never be taken away from us: the right to hope."

Whatever your own challenges are today. Whatever leads you to weep. The resurrected Christ is speaking your name, too. The invitation to see God's resurrection power and promise is yours, too. You are not alone. God is with you. And God is always at work in your life, in the church, in the community and world creating new life, new hope, and new beginnings.

You may not recognize it at first. Remember, Mary didn't recognize Jesus when she saw him. Perhaps that is because resurrection always leads to transformation. God had changed him - or perhaps God had changed her. Either way, we know that through the power of resurrection God changes us. The signs of resurrection are all around us this day. The flowers are beginning to bloom. The grass is suddenly so green. Buds on the trees will soon become leaves. We are here, many of us in person for the first time in three years. The Ukrainians are fighting back. The country is more engaged in talking about race than we have been in fifty years.

Where do you see signs of resurrection in your own life? How will you move forward from this period of grief and fear and uncertainty as a transformed person?

Of course, the Easter story doesn't end with Mary's encounter with the resurrected Christ. After Mary recognizes Jesus, she runs to the other disciples, shouting, "I have seen the Lord!" Soon enough, Jesus appears to the others, as well, and his instructions to them are clear. Go, take the transformative power of resurrection out into the world! Transform the world with love, justice, and hope! Meet others with kindness and grace. Walk alongside those who are weeping, the poor, the marginalized, the persecuted, and offer them the Good News of resurrection. Jesus calls them to embody his teachings as a living example to the world of how love and compassion lead to justice and healing. They will be God's tools of transformation in a broken world.

And, of course, that is our calling, as well. As Jesus was resurrected into the disciples, so is he resurrected in us. As Jesus sent the disciples to teach the world a new way, a path toward new life, Jesus sends us. As Jesus called the disciples to be bearers of hope and preachers of justice, Jesus calls us.

"Woman, why do you weep?" Man, child, those who are transgender, gay, straight, black, white, brown, disabled, able-bodied, Ukrainian, indigenous to this land or another, all of you, children of God, "Why do you weep?" It is a powerful question because it asks us what is breaking our hearts. Yet, it also is an invitation - an invitation to see and to celebrate that Christ is risen, new life emerges from death, hope from despair, rebirth from the ashes. An invitation to embody that message in how we live and carry it into the world.

So, on this day, if you weep, may they be tears of joy! May you hear the risen Christ call your name! And may you leave this place renewed and inspired to share all that Jesus taught us with a weeping world.

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.