

Why are you crying?
A Sermon for Easter, April 16, 2017
John 20:1-18
Lansdowne UMC

“Why are you crying?” Mary Magdalene was asked. It’s a question that gets asked twice in the Gospel reading-- once by the angels in the tomb, and once by Jesus himself.

Mary Magdalene, why are you crying? Don’t you know it’s Easter Sunday?

Let’s put ourselves in her shoes. The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary Magdalene was one of a group of women who followed Jesus as he did his ministry. These women themselves had been cured by Jesus of various ailments. We are told that for her part, Mary Magdalene had 7 demons thrown out of her. Mary had gotten her life back because of Jesus. And so presumably out of gratitude and a desire to see Jesus’ ministry continue to flourish in other places, we’re told these women provided for Jesus and for the Twelve out of there own resources.

Mary Magdalene's story takes a back seat for most of the gospels. And yet, while most of the disciples had abandoned Jesus out of fear, we learn that she was among the women who stayed with Jesus through the crucifixion.

So why is Mary crying? It doesn’t take a genius to figure out. There were lots of reasons to cry.

Jesus had literally saved Mary Magdalene from the grip of evil. How could he not have meant the world to her? She had left whatever life she'd had before to follow him, as much as a woman could in that chauvinistic culture that didn't permit women to be taught by a Rabbi, and who didn't count a woman's testimony as valid in a court of law.

Why was she crying? Because Jesus, her savior and her teacher, was brought up on false charges and brutally executed before her eyes. But it was more than losing someone important to her. She had also lost her hope. It had looked like Jesus was going to be the one who would at last usher in God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. God was going to do through him what God had always promised to do, to bring good news to the poor and the forgiveness of sins. But those hopes were all dashed on Friday, when Jesus died.

Can you imagine how disorienting it must have been? Life following Jesus was supposed to be better than this. Now life was suddenly and drastically not going "as it was supposed to go."

Maybe you *can* imagine how disorienting that loss must have been because you've been there yourself. Have you ever had a time in your life that left you disoriented, confused, and unsure of the way forward? You had your own ideas of the way things were going to go, but your life had suddenly plunged into darkness.

There were forces outside of Mary's control. There were the religious leaders, who seemed to do the opposite of what they were supposed to do. There was the Roman government, with the sovereign authority to

execute. She must have been upset those things. We all know what it's like to be up against forces outside of our control.

At the same time, Mary Magdalene must have been plagued by the questions we all face when we're grieving: am I somehow at fault for this? could I have done more? "God, how could you let this happen?" "I guess you weren't who I thought you were, Jesus."

We get it Mary. We get why you're crying.

But it's never just one thing that comes at you, is it? It wasn't enough that Jesus was dead. To add insult to injury, Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb to find the stone rolled away. In her grief, she jumps to the most likely confusion: her Lord's body has been taken away by grave-robbers.

From our perspective, we often talk about "the empty tomb" as "good news." But at this point in the story, it's clear that for Mary Magdalene the empty tomb isn't good news. It's the worst news. It's like pouring salt in the wound still raw from the crucifixion.

In her horror and raw grief, she *runs* to tell Peter and another disciple. She says to them, "They've taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don't know where they've put him!"

They run back to the tomb and look in, and when they do, they see something curious. Jesus' grave clothes were still in the tomb, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head was all nicely folded up. Suddenly the story of Jesus' body being stolen makes less sense. What grave robber

stops in the middle of exhuming a body to fold the laundry only to have to carry out an uncovered body? It just doesn't fit.

It says that when the other disciple looked in the tomb, "he saw and believed." Perhaps he remembered what Jesus had told him at the last supper: "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going off to the Father, because the Father is greater than I..." (14:28). Maybe he remembered Jesus saying that he told them beforehand so that they would believe after it happened. Ok, so maybe that's it. Jesus isn't there because he's gone to be with his Father in heaven, just like he said.

But it says that Mary stood outside the tomb weeping. It doesn't seem like Mary was in on those conversations. The Jesus from before is gone. All she's got left is to stare at the tomb that stands there like a monument of her grief and shattered hopes.

I wonder how many of us here today are still mourning the loss of our first faith. Maybe you remember a time when things were simpler. When you walked and talked with Jesus as best as you knew how, and that was good. But that was before the brutality of the world snatched that from you. Sure, you've come to the empty tomb, but for you, as for Mary, the empty tomb isn't good news. It's simply a pointer to a world that provides more pain than comfort, and more questions than answers.

Why are you crying? Have you lost your hope?

Mary is mourning the loss of her old faith. But she doesn't need her old faith. She needs a faith that has endured the reality of violence and death

only to meet Jesus again, as if for the first time. She needs a resurrection faith.

But as she stands at the tomb, her grief is controlling her. Mary can keep looking in the tomb all she wants, looking for the Jesus she used to know. Jesus that made sense. Familiar Jesus. Jesus who stayed where you put him. Dead Jesus. Except Jesus isn't where they put him. He's not dead. He's not in the tomb.

Staring into the tomb, she sees the two angels who ask her the question. "Why are you crying?" By this point she's so numb to reality that the presence of angels doesn't even seem to startle her. And so she just rehashes the answer that she's been giving everyone who asks. "They've taken away the Lord and I don't know where they've put him"

Then something amazing happens. "As soon as she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there..." Jesus stands behind Mary, waiting for her to turn around. Mary can't stop herself from grieving-- pain is too complicated for that. But she can decide to stop orienting her life toward the tomb. She can turn from searching for the faith she had before. She can turn from her regrets over the past-- what should have been, what could have been. She can turn away from the tomb and see what she's been missing.

I wonder if Mary felt Jesus' eyes on her. Because when she turned, Jesus was right there. Just waiting. Just letting her take that first step toward him at her own time. Just waiting for her to take her eyes off of the past and consider what God's future might be.

She turns and she sees “Jesus standing there, but she didn’t know it was Jesus.” She’d just seen him a few days earlier? Why doesn’t she recognize him?

Yes, she’s turned from the tomb, but she’ll continue to be confused until she finds her resurrection faith. She needs to turn inwardly from her boxed-in view of Jesus. She needs to seek Jesus in a fresh way.

The Jesus-she-doesn’t-recognize asks her the same question the angels asked. “Why are you crying?” But he adds something new, “Who are you looking for?”

Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus yet, but having turned from the tomb, she’s open to some new possibilities. I can imagine her thinking, “A gardener? Okay... think, Mary. Maybe Jesus’ body wasn’t stolen. Maybe this gardener just moved him.” She says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him.”

She’s finally ready. She’s turned from the tomb. She’s begun to seek Jesus in a fresh way. At last she’s ready to meet Jesus again. All Mary has to do is hear Jesus calling her name.

Watch what happens next. Jesus tells her to go tell the disciples that Jesus is going up to the Father. Only moments ago, Mary Magdalene had no future. She was hopeless. But now she’s seen that Jesus is alive. And of all the people in the world that Jesus could have appeared to first, he appears to her. He doesn’t appear to Peter, the leader of the disciples. He doesn’t appear to the one the Gospel of John calls “the disciple that Jesus loved.” He doesn’t appear to the Roman Emperor or to the

religious leadership. He appears to Mary Magdalene-- a woman whose testimony supposedly didn't count.

(By the way, this is an amazing piece of evidence that this scene actually took place. If you were trying to fabricate a story about how your leader had been raised from the dead, certainly you would choose someone reputable to be your first witness!)

But Jesus doesn't choose the reputable first. He chooses the left out. The broken. The hopeless. The mourning. And Mary Magdalene becomes the first apostle-- the apostle sent to the apostles.

She has seen the Lord. The empty tomb isn't bad news any more. Even the crucifixion, with all its horror, becomes good news. Because of the resurrection, Jesus didn't die in vain. The world did its worst, but God's power was far greater. Christ is risen. God is doing a new, surprising thing-- just like God always said he would.

So why are *you* crying? Who are *you* looking for? Are you stuck staring at the tomb-- the monument to a failed past, a faith that's gone?

Maybe it's time to turn around. Are you sensing that? That feeling isn't something emerging from your emotion. It's Jesus' eyes on you. He's right there, waiting for you to choose to turn from the broken past and seek him in a new way.

"Why are you crying?" he says to you. Don't be fooled by his common appearance. He's calling your name in way that is simultaneously

familiar and strangely new. He wants you-- even you!-- to join in Mary's testimony. "I have seen the Lord!"