

“Before there can be Resurrection there must be Death”

John 20:1-18 April 16, 2017

The angels asked her: “Woman, why are you weeping?” Jesus asked her the same question, “Woman, why are you weeping?” This question echoes down the centuries of time until it reverberates within the walls of our sanctuary this morning. “Why...why are you still weeping?” The women had come to the grave of Jesus on that morning two thousand years ago. It was the first Easter morning and they had come to the grave with their ointments, their perfumes, their oils to anoint the dead body of Jesus on that Sunday morning. They were devout followers of Jesus and they had come to perform this one last task for their Master.

These women had witnessed the awfulness of Good Friday. They must have been there outside the home of Pontius Pilate and heard Pilate’s orders to whip Jesus. These women saw Jesus’ body after it was flogged and beaten. They saw Jesus carry the cross to the Place of the Skull. At the place of the Skull, they saw the nails hammered through his wrists by the soldiers. They heard the taunting by the crowds and gawkers. They listened to Jesus’ seven last words. They watched his body as it breathed its last and died. These women saw it all, close up, huddled together for strength. It was awful, horrible, gut-wrenching. These women then watched Jesus’ body as it was taken down from the cross. Then they followed at a distance to see where Jesus was buried. It was Friday late afternoon, and the Sabbath rules dictated that they had to go home.

And then on Sunday morning, at the break of dawn, the first day of the week, the first day that they could grieve and pay homage to Jesus’ body, these same women quietly walked along the path to the place of Jesus’ burial. It was

still dark. It was before the breaking of dawn. A group of women were there, three or four or five of them, but the Gospel of John does not focus on this group of women but it focuses on one particular woman. Just one woman, Mary Magdalene was her name. The Gospel of John tells us the Easter story of Mary Magdalene.

Mary Magdalene was deeply attached to Jesus. The word, “Magdalene,” means “from Magdala” and the Magdala was a small town near Capernaum. We know from the first three gospels that Jesus had healed her of a disease of demon possession; she had seven demons before Jesus healed her. Jesus healed Mary and two other women that day. Mary Magdalen accompanied a band of women who traveled with Jesus and his disciples. This band of women often paid for the disciples’ food and supplies. This band of women was at the crucifixion of Jesus and saw it all. As part of that band of women, Mary Magdalene’s heart must have been devastated, distraught, and dumbfounded as she saw her Lord crucified. She, with the other women, watched where his body was buried, and they were overcome with grief at the experience.

And now according to the Gospel of John, she came to Jesus’ grave early in the morning while it was still dark. She saw that the stone in front of the grave had been rolled away and so she *ran* to find Peter and John to tell them what had happened. She was upset, confused, bewildered at what had happened. She probably ran to the Mount of Olives where Jesus and his disciples stayed overnight when Jesus visited Jerusalem.

She found Peter and John. John was not called John but the disciple whom Jesus loved. Most Biblical scholars assume that “the beloved disciple” was John who became the author of the Gospel of John. In other words, Mary found Peter

and John, and John became the equivalent of a newspaper reporter at the scene of this event.

Peter and John ran to Jesus' grave. Sure enough, the gravestone was rolled away. John, the younger, got there first. John bent over and looked in and did not go in. Then Peter, the older fisherman, finally got there. They both walked into the grave, Peter first, and he saw that Jesus' body was gone. They saw the linen shroud in which Jesus' body had been wrapped lying there. The linen napkin, which had been on Jesus' head, was rolled up and not with the linen wrappings that had been on Jesus' body.

The Gospel of John tells us that at that very moment, John believed. He was making a true statement about himself. John had not seen the Risen Christ, but in that moment of looking at the linen clothes and rolled up napkin, he believed. John still did not understand the Scripture that Jesus would rise from the dead. But—John believed, before Peter, before anyone else!

And the two disciples went home.

John, the eyewitness, continues his story. John focuses on one particular woman, Mary Magdalene, and not the group of women.

As Mary was standing outside of Jesus' tomb, she was crying, weeping, grieving, sobbing. The Greek word implies "weeping deeply or sobbing." The word "weep" occurs four times in this story.

As she was weeping, Mary bent over to look into the tomb. This was not a tall doorway into the grave, as in some paintings from the Renaissance, but a shorter doorway of about three to four feet. Mary stoops to look in, as John stooped to look in. As she was bending over, stooping, looking into the tomb, weeping, she saw two angels in that tomb. The two disciples didn't see the two angels but Mary does. One angel was sitting at the head of the tomb where Jesus' body had

been and the other at the foot.

And the angels asked a pivotal question of Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?” That is the key question for today, “Why are you weeping, Mary?” That question echoes through the centuries and into our hearts today. “Why are you weeping?” Mary replied, “Because someone has taken away my Lord and I don’t know where they have put his body.”

Then, after Mary had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there but she did not recognize Jesus. She thought it was the gardener. Jesus said to her, “Why are you weeping? What are you looking for?” Again, this is the pivotal question in this text. This is the pivotal question of life that echoes through the corridors of time and echoes within the walls of our sanctuary today: “Why are you weeping?” Mary said to him, “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.”

Jesus said, “Mary.”

She turned to him and said in Hebrew, “Rabboni which means Teacher.”

Jesus said, “Do not hold onto me for I have not ascended to my Father. Go and tell the other disciples that I am ascending to your Father and my Father, to my God and your God.”

And Mary went and told the disciples, “I have seen the Lord.” Mary Magdalene was no longer weeping. She had seen the Lord. Instead of tears, there was triumph in her voice.

From this story, a question persists from that first Easter morning and Persists to us this day in the twenty first century. “Why are you weeping, Mary? Why are you still crying? Do you not know the truth about me? Do you still not know the truth that I Jesus have been raised from the dead and that whoever lives

and believes in me will never die but live forever? Why then are you still weeping? Why are you weeping?”

So I ask this question of you today, “Knowing that Jesus had been raised from the dead, why do we still weep at funerals and when loved ones die? Why do we still cry? Why do all human beings weep at the death of our loved ones?”

It is a universal trait, this weeping at the loss of a loved one. In all cultures, in all centuries, in all religions. No matter who you are, when your loved one dies, we weep. We cry. We mourn. We feel our loss. We are devastated.

There are so many different burial customs and burial rituals in every civilization and in every culture, but all human beings are the same in one important way: we all cry when our loved ones die.

“Why is this?” we ask.

A pastoral counselor, Doug Anderson, said that we human beings are deeply attached to one another. Because we human beings become so deeply attached to each other, we are also deeply wounded by the loss of our loved one. It is as if our hearts are torn apart, Think of that person that you deeply loved and that person died. Your mother, your father, your son, your daughter, your best friend. The agony of loss was incredibly deep. We human being become so deeply attached to each other. When death comes, it snatches that person from us.

For example, in the Old Testament, there is a story about David and his good friend, Jonathan, who was killed. David grieved deeply for his best friend. David and Jonathan were bonded at their hips, their hearts, their minds. David’s heart was torn apart when he learned about the death of this best friend. That is the way it is, with us human beings.

In the New Testament, there is a story about Jesus and his good friend,

Lazarus, who died. Jesus grieved deeply for his best friend. The Bible says that “Jesus wept” and the word, “wept” has that connotation of sobbing deeply in emotional pain. Even though Jesus knew about eternal life, he still wept deeply at the loss of his friend, Lazarus. The two were deeply attached. Jesus’ heart was torn apart when he learned about the death of his best friend. That is the way it is with us human beings.

Why are you weeping, Mary? Is it because you were so deeply attached and connected with Jesus Christ?

Another reason that people weep at times of death is because of the loss of the potential love that the deceased person symbolized. For example, when young Jeffery S. was killed by a car so many years ago at age seven, the parents and family grieved for the loss of Jeffery’s potential life: for all the joy that Jeffery would have created. For his friends. For his childhood years, his teenage years, his graduations, wedding, children, grandchildren, for all the joy that Jeffery would have brought to that family. When we grieve and weep, we may be weeping for the lost potential of our loved one. And we also weep because we feel sorry for ourselves, that we lost so much in their death. That’s the way it is with us human beings.

Knowing all of that, the Gospel of John is telling us that the Truth of Christ is stronger than our tears, that the Spirit of Christ is stronger than our sorrow, that God is stronger than our grief, that Easter is stronger than Good Friday, that life is stronger than death, that eternal life is stronger than eternal death.

At the end of the story for today, Mary Magdalene was no longer weeping, sobbing, crying. By the end of the story for today’s gospel lesson, Mary Magdalene was convinced that she had seen the risen Lord. And because she had

seen the Risen Lord, that affected her tears and crying. And Mary went and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord." Mary Magdalene was no longer weeping. She had seen the Lord. Instead of tears, there was triumph in her voice. Instead of sorrow, there were signs of relief that she had seen the Risen Christ. "I have seen the Lord. I have seen the resurrection. I have seen eternal life and I believe." She could have written the first line of the Easter hymn, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

There are times that the Truth of the Gospel penetrates our feelings and triumphs our feelings and we believe, "The Lord and my loved one live forever!" The gospel of the resurrection triumphs over our feelings of deepest loss and sorrow. It is not that our human feelings that God created in us go away, but that the truth of the Easter gospel is stronger than our feelings of sadness.

The principle of the resurrection is that before we can have newness in life, something must die. Before Jesus could be resurrected, he had to die. There could be no new life, eternal life, without the end of the old life. Jesus could not be fully known in the future without the experience of the cross. Death did not have the last word. As Paul said to the Church at Corinth, "The last enemy to be destroyed is death."

The Principle of the Resurrection applies to all of life. When part of us dies or even all of us dies, we are reborn, recreated into something new. Resurrection is possible for all of us at any time in our lives. When we can "die" or "let go", take turns or make new choices anything is possible. No doubt there will be some rocky moments but transformation is always a possibility.

In the film, "As Good As It Gets," Jack Nicholson plays the part of Melvin Udall. Udall was a wealthy writer but a crotchety, unhappy man. He did not relate to his neighbors. He was afraid of the outside world. He was superstitious and

obsessive-compulsive. He would wash his hands excessively and always took his own sterile utensils to the same restaurant. When he walked he avoided cracks in the sidewalk. When he returned to his apartment he bolted his door with five locks.

His neighbor, Simon, played by Greg Kinnear, is mugged and ends up in the hospital. Meanwhile, Melvin was forced to take care of his dog. This was the same dog that Melvin threw down the laundry chute earlier in the film. Melvin begins to have a change of heart. At his favorite restaurant he paid for the medical treatment of the son of the waitress, Carol Connelly, played by Ellen Hunt. Eventually he falls in love with her.

One day as Melvin left his apartment he was shocked to discover that he had left his door unlocked. By some miracle he had overcome his fear of the outside world and had become loving and generous, free of his obsessive-compulsive behavior.

Just as Melvin was transformed, we too can be transformed through the power of the resurrection. We remember Mary Magdalene as the first person who experienced the Risen Christ. She saw the Risen Christ and her belief transformed her feelings of sadness. Do you remember the question that Jesus and the angels asked of her and still ask of you and me so many centuries later, "Why are you still weeping? Don't you know that I have been raised from the dead? Why then are you still crying?" May we truly rejoice in the good news of the Risen Christ and be transformed by His love, grace, and mercy in our lives. Amen and amen.