

Series: The Questions Lent Asks

Today: Why are you weeping and Who are you seeking?

Text: John 20:1-18

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.
Sunday, April 24, 2011 (Easter Sunday)
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

This is my 15th Easter in Lancaster, and it is always a privilege to welcome our visitors on Easter morning. We know that many of you are visiting your families here in Lancaster, and those of us who live here love to have you get a taste of heaven before you die. Lancaster is a great place to live and work, and if you like what you see, we would love to have you consider moving here and being part of our community.

We also know that there are those for whom church is not a regular part of your life, and we are honored that you chose to be part of our life here at First Presbyterian Church this morning. You have chosen the best Sunday in the year to give us a visit for if there is only one message that you are going listen to in the course of a year, Easter is surely the one we would want you to hear. Easter is the Sunday that you are guaranteed to hear the story which is at the heart of the Christian faith. It is a story which confounds reason; a story which requires a leap of faith to believe, but it is a story which gives meaning a purpose to the lives of billions of people on this planet. It is the story of the triumph of life over death; hope over despair.

It is a story that a 5 year old can experience even if they do not fully comprehend it; and who amongst us fully comprehends it? One of our members told me about visiting the grave of her mother with her 5 year old son, and on the way out of the cemetery they drove past a freshly excavated gravesite. The little boy said, *“Look, Mom! Someone else must have gotten out just like Jesus!”*

We hope that today you will leave this Sanctuary knowing that even in the face of death, life goes on, and that if you need someone to share your journey, you will accept our invitation to join us as we seek to live out our vision: *Discovering the Heart of Christ in the Heart of the City*.

This particular Easter I am acutely aware that not everyone comes to experience of Easter arrives with feelings of joy. In spite of the music, the flowers, and the festive outfits, there are some of us here who come with heavy loads to carry. For some this is the first Easter since they have lost a loved one. For others it is first Easter without job. Still others have ended a relationship since they were here last year. As a nation, we continue to be in the midst of a difficult economy and we are involved in wars which place our children and others we love in harm's way. There are any number of other trials which make some of us candidates for the message of pain and suffering which we heard on Good Friday; and not the message of hope we proclaim on Easter.

So that is precisely where I want to begin this morning as we examine our scripture. How does someone, whose life is filled with nothing but sadness, find a message of hope and joy on Easter? May I suggest to you that John 20:1-18 gives us two questions we must ask if we are to find hope in the face of despair: *Why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?*

Why are you weeping?

The first Easter, according to our scripture lesson for this morning, did not begin with joy. It began with grief. The women went to the tomb to do what could not be done properly on Good Friday. They went to prepare the body of Jesus for a proper Jewish burial with ritual washing and the anointing of the body with perfumed oils. The first Easter did not begin with joy. It began with tears near a grave, and grief is an appropriate response to the loss of someone or something that we hold very dear.

Edgar Jackson, who has studied the grief process for decades, describes the feelings people have when they are faced with the news that someone they love has died: *Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone. Grief is the man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. She knows that a part of her is in the cemetery, just as part of her is in her daily work. Grief is silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died. Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will be again. Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect the energies of life.*

Why are you weeping? Mary Magdalene teaches us that sadness is the human response to loss, and Jesus honors that response. He doesn't say be strong. He asks her to share her experience so that she can be healed. Weeping is biblical, and it is natural. To avoid our sadness can lead to becoming stuck with unresolved emotions that will destroy you and the relationships which you hold dear.

The angels (the word means 'messengers of God') ask Mary, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Jesus, whom Mary mistakes as a gardener, asks the same question, and she tells him about her loss: "*They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him.*"

Sharing her loss is the healthiest thing she could have done. She had a number of choices that she could have made. She could have apologized, "Oh, I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't be so

emotional.” She could have denied it, “I’m not crying, really. I just have something in my eye.” However, she chose to be honest with the angels and with Jesus, whom she thought was a gardener. “I am weeping because I loved the man, and now they have taken his body, and I don’t know where they put it.”

Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Church outside Chicago, once reminded his congregation that grief which is kept private, grief that is buried from public view, can become toxic. Listen to what he said: *“Fifty years ago industrialists thought they could just bury toxic waste and it would go away. We have since learned it doesn't just go away. It makes trouble. It leaks into the water table, contaminates crops, and kills animals. Buried grief does the same thing. Some would say that time heals all wounds, but that is not necessarily true. Time doesn't heal a thing. Buried pain leaks into our emotional system and wreaks havoc there. It distorts our perceptions of life, and it taints our relationships. That contamination happens subconsciously.”* (from *A Better Kind of Grieving*, Preaching Today, tape 108).

Mary Magdalene models good grief for us. She shares her pain with someone else. It doesn’t need to be loss from a death. Grief is the process of reorganizing your life after you have experienced the loss of someone or something which requires a major reorientation of your life. It can be a relationship, a career, a home, or a change in a family situation which requires some major reorganization of your life.

If you don’t have anyone else whom you can trust, one of us on the staff would be honored to be trusted with your grief. Our Stephen Ministry program has trained lay people who are willing to walk along side you until you have the strength to walk by yourself. If you need more help, or if you are embarrassed sharing with us, allow us to recommend someone on the staff of the Samaritan Counseling Center who specializes in loss, and we will even get you

started on your healing journey with one of the vouchers we receive because we are a partner church.

The definition of grief is the loss of someone or something, the loss of which is central to the way your life functions that it requires a major reorganization of your life. Whatever it is that may be keeping you from enjoying the fullness of life, find someone whom you trust and talk about it or risk the possibility of those feelings becoming toxic and destroying you and those you love.

Who are you seeking?

There is even a deeper question than why are you weeping which our text asks this morning. It is an even more important question for us to answer. For those of you who came weighed down by the circumstances in your life today, who are you seeking? For those who are here because it is Sunday and this is what you do on Sunday, who are you seeking? For those of you who came out of some sense of duty to family today, who are you seeking?

According to the scripture, the one who meets Mary at the empty tomb is Jesus Christ who had been put to death by the empirical powers of his time. On Friday he was dead and buried. Now on Sunday he has risen from the dead and is alive. The One who is there to greet her is alive, and his rising from the tomb changes her life forever.

At one time it was Church tradition that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute. Some have suggested that she was the repentant sinner who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears and wiped them with her hair. While modern scholarship calls such tradition into question, what if she represents is all of us who have been bound by the judgments of others which have kept us from being all we had hoped to be. All of those judgments died on the cross with Jesus, and the possibility of a life filled with hope and purpose stands in front of her.

Jesus calls her by her name, not by her label. Not freak; not a whore, but *Mary* and her eyes are opened and she recognizes him. When someone knows who we are and calls us by name, we are given courage to deal with our past and live into our present. When we have nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to hide because we have been loved by the one who created us and sustains us day by day, we find hope again. Jesus offers such a relationship to Mary; a relationship which says the worst thing you have ever done is not enough to keep me from loving you.

With that, Mary is suddenly set free. She is given new work to do; to run and tell the disciples all that she had seen and heard. She is free to fully accept the love of God that Jesus offers her. She is set free from the grief which was weighing her down and would surely keep her from moving forward to become a productive part of her community. This woman, who may have been the object of scorn and pity in her day, we now speak her name with reverence because she found what she was looking for in Jesus Christ, and it set her free.

There is a story told of a spy who was captured and then sentenced to death by a general in the Persian army. This general had the strange custom of giving condemned criminals a choice between the firing squad and the big, black door. As the moment for execution drew near, the spy was brought to the Persian general, who asked the question, "What will it be: the firing squad or the big, black door?"

The spy hesitated for a long time. It was a difficult decision. He chose the firing squad. Moments later shots rang out confirming his execution. The general turned to his aide and said, "They always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet, we gave him a choice."

The aide said, "What lies beyond the big black door?" "Freedom," replied the general, "but I've known only a few brave enough to take it."

CONCLUSION

Mary wept. Then she shared her pain, and it was the risen Christ who healed her with one word—her name. “*Mary!*” No one called her by name like the one who gave meaning and purpose to her life.

She thought he was dead. She had come to give him a proper burial, and when she hears him call her by name, she dares to believe that the power of God is stronger than the power of death, and in that moment she believes that her life is not over, either.

Mary is given new work to do which gives her back her sense of meaning and purpose. She runs to share with the disciples the good news which she has received, in which she stands, and by which she is saved.

Friends, if you dare to believe this morning, you have been given good news to share, as well. And there are those who are waiting to hear it. Help them to weep over what they need to grieve. Call them by name. Speak to them at the point of their need. Tell them what the Lord has done for you, and what the Lord can do for them, if they dare to believe that He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Hallelujah!