
Why Are You Weeping?

John 20:1-18

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery on Easter Sunday, March 31, 2013 at Duke Chapel

Mary Magdalene has forgotten that it is Easter. According to one writer, there are three essential prayers—help, thanks, and wow (Anne Lamott). Easter is supposed to be a wow Sunday. Right? Can I have a few witnesses to say ‘wow’? But, Mary makes it a woe-is-me Sunday, not a wow Sunday. Come on, Mary, don’t rain on our Easter parade today or dampen the mood of our party. Don’t wrinkle our frilly dresses or mess up our new fancy hairdos or crush our favorite white Easter lilies. O Mary don’t you weep. But that’s exactly what she does “early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark.” Mary “stood weeping outside the tomb” in a pool of tears that drench this story. One commentator says that this biblical text is “awash in tears” (Allen Callahan). The pages of the pericope are still seemingly moist with Good Friday sorrow. But it is trumpet-tongued, brass-blasting Easter at Duke Chapel! Yet Mary reveals that we are an Easter people living in a Good Friday world. Mary “stood weeping outside the tomb.” Weeping is more than tears; it includes wailing and lamentation for the dead. It’s an ancient Jewish expression of mourning and grief.

Why does Mary weep? She says, “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” Mary does not weep as a sign of the penitence of the gift of tears nor does she weep over the bitter division in this country over human equality. Mary weeps because she mourns the loss of Jesus. The God she knew is gone. I did not say she mourned the death of Jesus in this case, because Jesus was already dead. She weeps because Jesus is lost. The One, who declared his university major to be finding the lost, was lost himself, and she couldn’t find him. Her weeping, or what John Donne calls “fruits of much grief,” flow because of the presence of the absence of Jesus. Jesus is MIA, missing in action. Mary had gone to the tomb because that was where she was used to finding Jesus, the dead Jesus, the impotent Jesus, the Jesus-who-does-not-meddle-in-my-life-Jesus, comfortable and cozy Jesus. Mary had become used to the place of death so she weeps because what she had come to expect had shifted all of sudden and everything she knew, Jesus, was gone. She weeps due to a nostalgic disorientation.

“They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” Mary still expects to find a dead Jesus in a dark tomb, located in the same old place and acting in the same old way. Controlled, cold, numb, and locked in a grave cave. Mary has forgotten that it is Easter. She weeps because she has lost what she has known to be reality, the usual place where she thought she could find Jesus forever—in a mausoleum manger. “They have taken away *my* Lord,” my personal Jesus, my concept of who Jesus is. I wish I could return to the days when it was as simple as ‘Jesus is the answer,’ a simpler way, no complexity to theology, no unanswered questions because the ‘bible tells me so,’ the good ole days when I ruled God from the throne of my own anxiety, and wrapped an entombed Jesus, not in swaddling clothes, but in a psychological safety blanket. That dead Jesus was gone for Mary. Where she left him, he could no longer be found. The Jesus she knew and believed in was lost, the tame Jesus of her childhood, the one with blond hair, blue eyes, and a pointy nose on the fans used in the country church. Her Jesus, her Lord, was lost. The one she understood. The dead Jesus laying in a dead place. A Good Friday world for an Easter people.

This is in stark contrast to what Anne Lamott dreams about in her book *Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith*. She dreams of an Easter like the resurrection vision of a child in Sunday School who drew an Easter Bunny, not Mary, outside of the empty tomb, joining eternal life with a basket full of chocolate eggs. With that vision, the tomb would be tasty. Yummy yummy to my tummy. What an Easter it would be—chocolate, white chocolate with macadamia nuts, dark chocolate melted over strawberries, Hershey chocolate ice cream cake, chocolate-covered grits with scrambled eggs. Maybe or maybe not. Either way, scientists have argued for years how eating sweet chocolate makes us feel good and is more pleasurable than listening to your favorite music or winning the lottery or even falling in love (don’t let your

significant other know that secret!). Chocolate can lift you to heights you've never seen before, they say. And a 2012 article in the New England Journal of Medicine argues that chocolate consumption contributes to one becoming a Nobel Prize winner; with this theory, we probably have a house full of Nobel Laureates!

Anne Lamott dreams of a chocolaty Easter—innocent, child-like, and care-free full of chocolate fountains flowing deep and wide outside of the tomb with the Easter bunny as the doorman. This is a dream. Not the reality she knows. On the contrary, she's not surprised by Mary's weeping in a Good Friday world.

Mary, not the Easter bunny, stood outside the tomb, without a basket full of chocolate eggs, but carrying despair and hope in the chest of her heart. Mary weeps because she finds herself in a Good Friday predicament on Easter morning. What else can she do in this situation? She could post a jazzy and flashy neon-colored flyer with Jesus' picture on it and put "Missing" at the top and hang it outside of the Bryan Center; but how could she do that when it seems as if Mary doesn't even know what Jesus looks like anymore? She had lost Jesus or at least her conception of him. She had gotten so used to a dead Jesus that a living Jesus was a stranger to her. And how strange this is when Mary learns how to weep from Jesus who wept at the tomb of Lazarus. She picks up where he left off—weeping. Mary loves Jesus and her tears are signs of that grieving love. But maybe the flood of tears blinds her eyes so she doesn't recognize Jesus when Jesus asks her face to face, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She "saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus." She sees him but doesn't see him with the eyes of faith. You can love someone but once that person changes you may not recognize him/her anymore. They may be so different because death and life are different. A dead Jesus is distinct from a living Jesus. UNC's men's basketball is different from Duke's men's basketball, and we know who's dead and who's still alive in the tournament! Jesus had changed clothes because he was alive and shook off the sting of death's designer attire. Death's clothing won't fit on a living God. Jesus left his tomb linen suit in the deathbed of the grave and was now wearing living clothes of light.

The question "Whom are you looking for?" suggests that the real issue was that Mary was looking for the wrong Jesus, a powerless dead Jesus in a cold tomb, just laying there. Not a living risen Jesus and Lord. She doesn't recognize him because she wasn't used to a living risen Jesus. She looked for him in the wrong places and had gotten used to a God who lies dead, inactive. A small, lifeless Jesus she could control and even carry around as she offers to take him away, if she can find out where he lays. But the living Jesus looks right at her.

Then Comedy Central arrives in the midst of a tragic time. After Jesus asks her why she's weeping and who she's looking for, Mary speaks to him "supposing him to be the gardener." She's talking to the incarnate God but thinks he's a gardener. That's like walking around in a department store shopping and someone asks you if you know what row the Clorox bleach is on; and you weren't even wearing an employee nametag. What made Mary think that Jesus was a gardener? Was it his tattered clothes or his accent or his humble demeanor, or his skin color or his body odor? Was it that he resembled God in the Garden of Eden? Was it the sweat on his brow or the scars on his hands? A gardener? That's like someone saying to me, 'you look like a preacher.' What's that supposed to mean!? You can't always judge a book by its cover. The writer of Hebrews teaches us not to neglect showing hospitality to strangers because by doing so some have entertained angels without knowing it. Mary was entertaining the resurrected God but she didn't know it. She saw a gardener.

According to various accounts, Sir Winston Churchill did not have the greatest relationship with his parents. As a young boy, he was berated by his father and told that he would grow up to be a failure. They perceived him to be less than what he was. What they saw, he was not. On top of that, he had a speech impediment and was discouraged by some of his teachers; sadly, most of us have probably had a teacher or a school counselor like that, who only knew how to be a midwife for stillborn hope. Yet, Churchill became one of the major 20th century leaders in the world. You can't judge a book by its cover. Too small. Too big. Too tall. Too short. Too thick. Too thin. Too loud. Too soft. Too uneducated. Too unsophisticated. Too human to be divine.

Jesus can be right in front of us but we don't recognize him because we think he's just a yard maintenance man. Our lack of recognition keeps us weeping in the dark of dawn. Even when resurrection comes, we may not recognize it because we've become so used to, so familiar with crucifixions, dying and death. And as the psychologists have taught—familiarity breeds liking. Liking death can become the norm when we hold membership at the Jerusalem temple of the tomb. Those who attend services there are dead too among the saintly zombies or at least counting down to the date of their death on the website, deathclock.com. No wonder weeping occurs. That is, weeping over our own death. Perhaps Mary weeps because a part of her dies when Jesus died. I don't know but I do know that she weeps because of disorientation due to losing her Jesus, the dead Jesus. But she's the one who's really lost because she doesn't know resurrection when it's even staring her in the face.

Good Friday weeping on Easter intrigues me, but I guess it makes sense since my former students at Princeton Seminary used to call me the 'doctor of death.' Mary's weeping is fascinating and I wonder something else about her weeping. Unwittingly perhaps, Mary weeps even as a deep yearning for the return of Christ. In fact, she weeps for resurrection and as a summons, an invocation for the presence of the risen Lord. She doesn't know this but her tears are prayers. Sometimes we cry and we don't even know why. We're weeping for resurrection. And just as "at the tomb of Lazarus, [Jesus'] tears inaugurated the triumph of life over death. So too, tears inaugurate the triumph of life over death here" (Callahan). In this context, we are reminded of the words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25).

Jesus, the one who rises and calls us by name ("Mary!") even if we don't recognize him, even if we think he's still dead. He's calling you. The risen, living Jesus refuses to be imprisoned in death's solitary confinement. This living Jesus cannot be controlled by our theological paradigms or ecclesial traditions embalmed in a tomb. We won't find the living Lord of light there, dressed in death's dingy clothes. Jesus is alive and on the move in the world, which is why he tells Mary "Do not hold on to me." You can't control me. You can't hold me down or hold me back or keep me dead and useless. There's too much work to do in the world. Too much interceding and healing and comforting and reconciling. Bringing peace in the midst of conflict. Love where there is hatred. Justice where there is oppression. "Do not hold on to me" with your sanctified straightjacket. Release me for the work of redemption. To ascend to the Father in order to lift you higher. Don't look for me at the tomb. You'll look for me and I'll be gone. I'm not there. I won't bring you back to the way it was because I'm no longer dead. "The way out of the darkness is only by moving ahead" (Craig Barnes) into my resurrection light. Don't dwell on the memories of the past, but remember the future I have for you.

Why are you weeping? Mary weeps not because she fears death but because she fears life, the new adventurous, unpredictable, resurrected life and future in Christ. The old, lost, dead predictable, comfortable ways, dead Jesus, had passed away. Behold, the living Jesus was making all things new. Weeping for all things new. A new start, a new beginning, a new day, when there would be no more tragedy and agony. All things new. What we see in the flesh of the risen Lord is God's embodied promise that a new day has begun in Christ and that resurrections still happen. All things new. A new start with your family that had fallen apart. A new job when you've just lost a job. A new dream for your life when you thought all you were capable of were nightmares. A new medical invention that may actually help cure cancer. All things new.

Because Jesus got up, we can get up, as he lifts us up as he ascends to the Father. Mary was down but when Jesus calls her name he lifts her spirit up, he wakes her up, he resurrects her, which is why she had been weeping for resurrection all along. Mary hoped for all things new. Mary's weeping ceases in the presence of the resurrected Christ who resurrects her when he calls her name. She was dead but in that moment he made her alive. She no longer needed a dead Jesus because the living One was right in front of her. Mary had "seen the Lord" and her life was never the same again. She became an apostle to the apostles.

After all she had been through in the past this was an unexpected future. We can't control the future but Christ leads us into the future and holds the future. We can't hold on to him because he's actually holding us. Why are you weeping? O Mary don't you weep, mothers don't you weep, fathers don't you weep, sons don't you weep, daughters don't you weep, students don't you weep, faculty don't you weep, facility workers don't you weep, coaches don't you weep, university administrators and staff don't you weep. Because in the life of the risen Christ we pass from death to life, from death's tomb to God's triumph, from an old age to the inauguration of a new one. An age when "[God] will wipe every tear from [our] eyes." An age when "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more." An age when we just might have chocolate for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Mary had forgotten Easter in her Good Friday world. But she no longer weeps and we no longer have to sing, "O Mary don't you weep." For weeping may endure for the night but Easter joy comes in the morning. This morning. Jesus is not dead. He is alive. I told you it was a wow Sunday. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Not even Easter bunny chocolate can beat that. Alleluia