
Why Are You Crying?

John 20:11-18

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on April 8, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I wonder if you've ever looked into a deep, dark, cave. It's cold, it's mysterious, it's maybe a little damp, and there's this little voice in your head that's saying to you, "If I go down too far into it either there'll be something scary and angry down there that'll get me, or, maybe worse, there'll be some kind of rock that will roll across the face of the cave and shut me in – and no one will hear my cries."

Mary Magdalene was looking into a cave like that on the first Easter morning. And it turned out there were indeed some creatures in the dark cave. Two angels. So not your average tomb, then. The angels are pretty observant, mind you. They can see the state Mary's in. They say to her, "Why are you crying?" You can tell these angels have never done a course in pastoral care and counselling. Because the first thing you learn in pastoral care and counselling is, "Never ask, 'Why?'" "Why?" is a useless question. It's threatening, unsupportive, paralyzing and conversation-stopping. It's the sort of thing a husband says. It's almost certain to make the person cry all the more, because if they could give a satisfactory answer, they probably wouldn't be crying, stupid. Mary, to her credit, doesn't say, "That's not a very helpful question. What kind of an angel are you?" She says, "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him."

Let's put ourselves in Mary's shoes for a moment, and allow ourselves to be asked that question. "Why are you crying?" *Why is Mary crying?* Let's hear her answer. "I'm crying because I'm experiencing horrifying loss, aching grief, and a huge hole where the love and hope and trust and joy of my life used to be. This man, this more-than-just-a-man, who was supposed to be laid in this tomb, turned my life from monochrome to technicolor, from a lonely violin to a crescendoing orchestra, from a limp and falling feather to a soaring eagle's wing. I'm crying because I'm staring into the horror of death, and death right now seems to be obliterating everything I want, everything I need, everything I know. I feel so powerless, so fragile, so alone."

But perhaps if we asked a more thoughtful question, we'd get an even bigger answer. "What's going through your mind, Mary?" Then she might say, "I keep thinking of the way they killed him. The nails, the blood, the jeering laughter, the noise, the sneering, the baying for blood, the throwing dice, the cheering, the way the disciples all ran away, the way Pilate washed his hands, the finger-pointing, the lashing, the spear piercing his side. Human beings can be so cruel, so mean, so violent, so stupid, so weak, so selfish, so treacherous. It's not just the death that makes me cry; it's the sin."

And then maybe we'd ask a deeper question, we'd get a bigger answer still. "Mary, what d'you think God makes of your tears?" I wonder if she'd say, "I think God's crying too. That's what makes my tears feel right. I feel I'm weeping with God's tears. Who can bear to see God's tears? I feel by letting myself cry I'm sharing in God's tears, mingling my tears with the tears of the Father who's grieving the death of Jesus and mortified by the depth of our sin. Somehow in these tears I feel I'm alone with the aloneness of God."

Here's Mary, staring into the unknown, weeping. And she's asked the question, "Why are you crying?" And her answer is, because of death, because of sin, because God's crying too.

And that leads me to ask the same question of you, this Easter morning, as you look into the unknown. "Why are *you* crying?" Of course we've all got resistances to answering the question. We've erected a wall of privacy around us, we've drawn a curtain of self-sufficiency, we've established a demeanor of emotional steadiness. "I'm not crying," we say. "I'm not the crying type." But then we look at Mary, as she has the courage to stare into the nothingness of the tomb, and we begin to touch the territory of those trembling tears.

"I'm crying because I realize my life is an orchestrated denial of death, and someday I'm going to have to face the truth of my mortality. I'm crying because like Mary I've lost people who put the color in my rainbow and

wind beneath my wings. I'm crying because I've been hurt, and disappointed, and betrayed, and I'm bleeding with pain about these things. But I'm also crying because I've been no angel myself, and I've done some things I can't undo, and I'm part of some habits and systems and addictions I can't extricate myself from, and I can't bear to see the pain I've caused others. I'm crying because I want to have a faith that takes the grief away but somehow I seem to find that being with God makes me cry more, not less. I'm crying because I'm just overwhelmed." Is that why you're crying?

Let me tell you about one night when I was crying. It was Christmas Eve, around 15 years ago. I was a young pastor. (In fact, as you see, I'm still a young pastor.) A few months earlier I'd been appointed to a church on the edge of town whose Sunday morning congregation was about 15. We started making plans for Christmas. We made a leaflet with a wise and witty Christmas message and a list of all the Christmas worship services on it. I insisted there should be a Midnight Communion. That was always the highlight of my Christmas growing up. No one in the congregation remembered ever going to church at midnight, but I still thought it was a great idea. I set the time for 11.30 p.m., December 24. We organized. We leafleted the whole neighborhood – more than 3000 houses. 11 pm Christmas Eve came. No one there. 11.15... still no one there. 11.25... still just me, the bread, and the wine. 11.30... I tried so hard, so hard, to stop a tear beginning to roll down my eyelashes.

Why was I crying? Because I'd tried so hard. Because for a moment I'd dared to hope. Because I felt I'd failed. Because I wondered if the church was dying. Because I felt humiliated.

I heard a rustling noise. I looked at my watch. It was 11.32. The door opened. Into the church walked a man and a woman, maybe late forties. I'd never seen them before. "Is it just us?" They asked. "I'm afraid it is," I replied, wondering if they were going to laugh at me. "Oh good," the woman said. "We waited outside in the garden to see if anyone else would come, and when we thought we'd be the only ones, we walked in." "How d'you mean," I said, gesturing them to sit down. After all, who wants to be alone at midnight on Christmas Eve with a hopelessly underachieving pastor? "Well," she said, "I guess you should know that Dave and I used to be married to other people until recently. There's a lot of folk unhappy about us being together. We moved out here because we didn't feel we could go to any of the downtown churches. In fact we haven't been to church at all for over a year. We were frightened to come tonight, but when we saw we'd be the only ones, we got the courage to walk through the door. Our lives are a mixture of love and shame. We want to begin again."

I stared at them in silence for a long time. It was a man and a woman in a garden. It was a story of death, and fear, and sin, and shame, and tears; and beginning, and life, and trust, and change, and love. It was midnight on Christmas Eve. But, through my tears, I was staring at the dawn of Easter Day. By the end of that night, I was still crying. But I was crying a different kind of tears. I was crying Easter tears.

When Mary turns away from the tomb, having not got much change out of the angels, she begins another conversation, this time with a man she takes to be the gardener, but we realize to be someone else. Jesus asks Mary the same question the angels just asked her. "Why are you crying?" He clearly hasn't done the pastoral care and counselling course either. And unless he wasn't paying attention, he must have heard the answer she gave to the angels. But Jesus adds a second question. "Whom are you looking for?"

"Whom are you looking for?" Now that *is* a good question. That's a good question to ask anyone, and it's an especially good question to ask Mary right this minute. Because Mary's obviously looking for Jesus. But who is Jesus? Well here's the crucial point. The story has shown us who Jesus is. Remember why Mary was crying? Mary was crying because she was facing her sense of loss in the face of death, her sense of fragility, and weakness, and loneliness and powerlessness. This is who Jesus is. He's the one who overcomes death, and transforms the fragile, the weak, the lonely and the powerless. Staring into the tomb she began to realize whom she is looking for.

But there's more. Who is Jesus? Mary was crying because she'd seen how ghastly humankind can be, she'd witnessed brutality and horror and duplicity and killing and betrayal. This is who Jesus is. He's the one who

dismantles sin, deflates enmity, heals cruelty, absorbs malice, forgives treachery. Staring into the tomb Mary begins to realize whom she is looking for.

There's still more. Who is Jesus? Mary was crying because she was shedding God's tears, tears of sadness for God's separation from us, from the rebellious creation. This is who Jesus is. He's the one who reunites us with God. He's the one who blends our tears with God's tears, he's the good shepherd who knows each one of us by name and gathers us into the Father's sheepfold, he's the true vine who grafts each one of us on as his branches. Staring into the tomb Mary begins to realize whom she is looking for.

And then Jesus says one word. "Mary." When you've been crying, what's the most helpful thing anyone can do? They can be silent with you, in wordless presence, to affirm the value of your sorrow and the truth of your tears. They can touch you, gently, respectfully, lovingly, to share your humanity and show you you're not alone. And they can speak tenderly, just a word or two, that makes you feel accompanied, received, understood.

"Mary." She's crying, but she feels the sense of a companion with whom she will never again be alone, she senses the touch of the one who will never let her go, she hears her name like never before. "Mary." Her eyes are opened. She's looking into the face of the resurrected Jesus.

And now, surely, she discovers a different kind of tears. She's known what it means to be overwhelmed by loss, by sin, by the absence of God. But now she's crying more than ever, yet in a new way. She's crying because, if Jesus has emerged from the tomb, that means he's not been destroyed by the grave, and she's blinded by the wonder of imagining what it's like to live beyond death, to enjoy life forever, to put aside fear and loss and grief and sorrow; and the tears are cascading down her cheeks and falling to the ground in fountains of joy. She's crying because, if Jesus is alive, that means he's dismantled sin, and she's swathed in a shower of tears in dreaming of a world where enmity's healed, hatred is transformed, cruelty's turned to kindness and anger's displaced by mercy. She's crying because if Jesus is looking at her that means he's reunited us with God, and her disbelief is being washed away by a tidal wave of grace, and she's in an ocean of glory with angels and archangels and saints and cherubim and all the company of heaven. These tears don't seek the comfort of one person to share, to receive, to cherish, and to understand. These tears are infectious – they need to be taken to the whole world. These are the tears of baptism that are sent to refresh everyone; this is an overwhelming that's destined to flood the whole creation with joy. Mary's asking the whole creation, "Why *aren't* you crying?"

Here are a man and a woman in a garden, the very picture that started the whole Bible, the very place where everything went wrong. And here again is this man and this woman, at the very place where everything is put right again; but way beyond the imagination of that first man and woman, because here is not just the setting-right of human relations with one another, but here is the reunion between humanity, creation, and God. If that doesn't make you cry with tears of joy, nothing ever will.

So here's my question for you, this blessed Easter morning. Why are you crying? Are you looking into the tomb, overwhelmed by grief, by sin, by utter loneliness? Or are you looking into the face of the risen Lord, overwhelmed by glory, by wonder, by joy? Whom are you looking for? The one who overcomes death, dismantles sin, and reunites you with God? Well, here's the good news of Easter. He's looking at you, kid.

Easter's drenched in tears. But they're tears of joy.