

The Deep Grief of Mary

Today's first Gospel lesson is a great promise given to us by Jesus Christ. That promise that He gives is that He will bring us home to Himself when we complete our race of faith. It's a Bible story that's often used in celebrations of life. It's a comforting and reassuring passage. I want to look at another comforting and reassuring passage, also from the Gospel of John this morning – his account of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to John 20:11-18. I'm reading from the NIV Bible today. **Read John 20:11-18.**

The way this passage starts is one of the saddest moments in the New Testament. Prior to what we just read, Mary had come to the tomb earlier – while it was still dark – and found the stone rolled away. She ran back to the disciples and told Simon Peter and the beloved disciple – most Bible scholars consider it to be John, the author of the Gospel – and they ran ahead of her back to the tomb. They saw it was empty, left, and that's where our passage picks up.

The apostle writes:

Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put Him," (John 20:11-13).

See friends, Mary is grieving here. She thinks someone's come along and taken Jesus' body. She doesn't even realize she's talking with angels – she's so overwhelmed with her grief.

How often do we do that? How often do we miss hearing the message that God's sent along to us through a messenger? That's what "angel" means when you translate the Greek word used in Scripture; it means "messenger." How often are we so deep in despair that we can't hear what God is trying to tell us through somebody else? That's what's going on with Mary here in these first couple verses. Not only is she mourning the death of Jesus, but now, she's also grieving the loss of His body.

The emptiness of the tomb deepens her despair and grief. I suspect, if we could talk with the disciples on that first Resurrection morning, all of them would feel the way that Mary did. Filled with despair and hopeless. They had seen Jesus die the worst death imaginable just a couple days beforehand.

Christ the Lord is Risen Today

Our first hymn this morning was *Christ the Lord is Risen Today*. That's an Easter song. This moment of deep sorrow experienced by Mary and the others connects us to this great hymn. Written by Charles Wesley in 1739, it originally had eleven verses. The "Alleluias" were added later. Charles and John Wesley didn't have easy lives. As founders of the Methodist movement, they were seeking to reform and reinvigorate the Anglican Church – both of them were Anglican priests. Their dad had also been an Anglican priest. But because of their evangelistic tendencies, they, and their contemporary George Whitefield, were not welcome in most pulpits.

They were calling for the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the prostitutes, and the alcoholics to come to the Church. And the folks in charge of the Church didn't like that. They didn't want the "riff-raff" in the Church. So, Whitefield and the Wesley brothers started preaching in fields. Open-air preaching was a new thing – and they drew crowds of five hundred, even a thousand people at a time.

There's a lot of people running around today trying to keep the "riff-raff" out of the Church – and I'd counter that the folks doing that are Methodist or Christian in name only! Wesley's hymn captures the transformation that's about to occur in Mary's heart. Just like the hymn celebrates the victory of Christ over death, Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus will turn her mourning into joy. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ isn't just an historical event, but it's a present reality that changes everything – it is the turning point from grief to glory, and from death to life.

Notice what happens next in our passage:

At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking He was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have put Him, and I will get Him." Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward Him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"), (verses 14-16).

Softly and Tenderly...

Now we see Mary experience the Resurrected Lord, face-to-face. At first, she doesn't recognize Him, and mistakes Him for the gardener. It's only when Jesus calls her by name that she realizes who He is. This moment of recognition is profound – Jesus knows her, and in calling her by name, He reveals Himself to her in a deeply personal way.

Earlier we sang the hymn, *Softly and Tenderly*, written by Will Lamartine Thompson in 1880. Thompson's story starts in Pennsylvania and ends in New York City. For a time, he lived in Ohio. During his lifetime he was called, "the Bard of Ohio." He was a poet composer, and he knew it!

He composed secular and patriotic songs. When they were rejected by the publishers of his day, he formed his own publishing company, with offices in Chicago and East Liverpool, Ohio. By the 1880's Thompson had become a millionaire. In gratitude for all that God had done for him, he gave up secular music, and started writing and publishing only Christian music. He eventually loaded a piano in the back of a horse drawn wagon to take his worship music to rural churches all over the country and it was used frequently at revivals.

... Jesus Is Calling

Oftentimes we hear this hymn towards the end of a worship service, and it's used as an altar call. There's one story about this hymn in particular that I think is noteworthy. The famous preacher of the late 1800's, D.L. Moody, while on his deathbed, heard Will Thompson in the hallway of his home. Many people had come to pay their respects to the preacher, but the doctors turned all of them away – except for Thompson – because Moody heard him and asked to see him. The dying evangelist said, “Will, I would rather have written “Softly and Tenderly Jesus Is Calling” than anything I have been able to do in my whole life.”

With a heart of gratitude, the singer/songwriter turned everything he had over to God and did more for the Church than what the Billy Graham of his day did, according to the Billy Graham of his day – Dwight L. Moody. What do you suppose we could do, New Hope, if we considered what Christ has done for us at the cross and the empty tomb, and turned everything we had over to God? What sort of spiritual revivals would we see right here on the corner of Mason and Patterson-Halpin Roads?

Speaking more practically on the topic of revival, as a church family, we need an AED – an automated external defibrillator. There may be someone coming who needs physical reviving here before they get a spiritual one. An AED is a portable device that can be used to treat a person whose heart has suddenly stopped working. They cost anywhere between \$2000 and \$3000. There's no line for it in the budget, so I'm asking you church, to come up with that money – to potentially save someone's life – before we have the Hutson's here on September 8. I'd like to have it completely installed and ready to use by the time they get here, because we don't know who all they'll be bringing with them, and they might need it. That's three weeks from today. I know we can do it!

“Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me,” Thompson wrote. His song reminds us that Jesus calls each of us – by name – inviting us into a personal relationship with Him. Just as Mary hears her name and turns toward Jesus, we're invited to hear His call in our own lives, to turn from our sorrows and fears, and to recognize the presence of the Risen Lord. His call is gentle, but powerful. He draws us out of darkness and into His marvelous light.

In The Garden

Mary's encounter with Jesus occurs in a garden. It's a setting that is rich with symbolic meaning. In the Bible, gardens are often spaces where people encounter God. Adam and Eve met God in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane. Here, in the garden near the tomb, Mary experiences the first-fruits of the new creation that Jesus' resurrection brings.

This garden encounter brings another of our hymns to mind. *In the Garden*, by C. Austin Miles, was written in 1912. Miles was a pharmacist, but gave up that career, and became an editor at a publishing company in Pennsylvania. Miles recounted how his most famous song developed:

One day in March 1912, in the darkroom where I kept my photographic equipment and organ, I drew my Bible toward me; it opened at the favorite chapter, John 20 – whether by chance or inspiration let each reader decide. That meeting of Jesus and Mary had lost none of its power to charm. As I read it that day, I seemed to be part of the scene. I became a silent witness to the dramatic moment in Mary's life, when she knelt before her Lord, and cried, 'Rabboni!' My hands were resting on the Bible while I stared at the light blue wall.¹

Miles has a vision where he sees this whole passage play out on the wall of his darkroom. He continues:

I awakened in full light, gripping the Bible, with muscles tense and nerves vibrating. Under the inspiration of the vision I wrote as quickly as the words could be formed the poem exactly as it has since appeared. That same evening I wrote the music.²

His hymn captures the intimacy of walking with Jesus. For Mary, the garden becomes a place of transformation. Her sorrow is turned to joy as she recognizes Jesus. The hymn invites us to experience that same closeness with Jesus, to walk with Him in the gardens of our own lives, where He meets us in our moments of despair, and brings us the hope of resurrection.

When We All Get to Heaven

Notice what John records next. "Jesus said, 'Do not hold on to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to My brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, to My God and your God.' Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: 'I have seen the Lord!' And she told them that He had said these things to her," (verses 17-18). Jesus gives Mary a commission here – to go tell His "brothers" that He's ascending to the Father. He wants Mary to tell His disciples where He's going. Mary's not only the first to see the Risen Christ, but she's also the first to be sent out as a witness to His resurrection.

¹ Pamela Kennedy, *Hymns of Faith and Inspiration*, (Carmel: Guideposts, 1990), page 96.

² Ibid, pg. 96.

I want to make sure you grasp the importance of this today. Mary's encounter with Jesus transformed her into a messenger of the Gospel. She was the first messenger of the Resurrected Christ. She brought the Good News of Jesus' victory over death to His disciples. The message was entrusted to a woman. We've got some brothers and sisters today who would be very uncomfortable hearing me say that – they'd say I was "progressive," or "woke." I don't think I am; I'm just telling you what the Word says. A lot of those same folks only spend twenty or thirty minutes in it a week while they're wearing their Sunday face.

The commission Christ gives to Mary points us toward the ultimate hope we have in Jesus Christ. We're going to wrap up in a few minutes with another hymn, *When We All Get to Heaven*, by Eliza Hewitt and Emily Wilson. Both of these ladies were from Philadelphia. Hewitt was a poet, and Wilson was a musician. Their song was written in 1898, during the time of revivals and camp meetings.

Apparently, these ladies met at Methodist camp meetings that were regularly held in Ocean Grove, New Jersey. In those days, everybody in the area got together and camped out, worshiped, and so on. So, you had Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, even Quakers at this get together. I suppose it would be similar to going over to BMI in Versailles, or Rock the Lake at Indian Lake to listen to Crowder. Anyhow, Hewitt had a spinal illness that kept her homebound for many years, and Wilson's husband was a Methodist preacher in Philadelphia. The two ladies put their talents together and came up with a hymn that captures the spirit of a post-Civil War America, longing for peace which ultimately only Jesus can give.

Just as Mary is sent to proclaim the Resurrection, we too, are called to live in the hope of Heaven, knowing that Jesus has gone ahead of us, to prepare a place for us. The Resurrection isn't the end of the story – it is the beginning of a new life that we're called to live now, with our eyes fixed on the eternal glory that awaits us. In looking at today's Scripture, we see that the Resurrection of Jesus Christ – the greatest event in the history of the world – isn't something to be celebrated just once a year at Easter. It's a reality that transforms us day by day.

Through Mary's encounter with the Risen Christ, we're reminded that Jesus meets us in our grief, calls us by name, walks with us through the garden of life, and sends us out to share the great news of His victory. As you prepare to leave this space today, I pray that you carry the joy of the Resurrection in your hearts, knowing Jesus is alive, and that He's always present. Let's listen for His voice – even in our despair – walk with Him each day and share the Good News of His love and grace with everyone we encounter, until that wondrous day when we see Him face-to-face on the other side of life.

Prayer: Thank You, Lord, for the assurance that You are always with us, even to the end of the age. May Your resurrection power fill us with hope, strength, and a deep sense of Your abiding presence. Open our eyes to see You in our daily lives, open our ears to hear You speak to us, and open our hearts to receive Your love. As we walk in the light of Your resurrection, give us the courage to be messengers of Your peace, spreading Your love wherever we go. In Your name, we pray. Amen.