***WHY ARE YOU WEEPING? WHOM DO YOU SEEK?***

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Texts: John 1:1-18 and Psalm 30:4-5

One of the joys of ministry – at least most of the time – is answering children’s questions. Sometimes these arise spontaneously and sometimes they come by referral from parents who suggest to their child, “That would be a great question to ask John or Sarah!” Some of the questions are deeply theological: *Where do we go when we die? Who is God?* Some are biblically based: *How did Noah keep the lions from eating the deer on the ark? Why did they kill Jesus?* And some are purely practical: *Where do you get that communion bread?* and the oft-repeated: *Where did you put your hair?* But it is not children alone who ask a lot of questions; inquiring minds want to know, and our family of faith is full of inquiring minds.

Across these six weeks of Lent, we have considered a host of questions posed in Scripture. We began with the sassy question posed by Cain, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” and a thoughtful question posed by Paul, “*Where is the one who is wise?*” There was the anguished question of the psalmist, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” and an anguished disciple to whom a question was posed, “*Simon,* d*o you love me?*” There was a question of identity, “*Who do you say that I am?*” and a question of calling raised on Palm Sunday, “*Why are you doing this?*” Holy Week is full of its own challenging questions. Peter is asked, “*Aren’t you one of his disciples?*” and denies it three times; Pilate wonders, “*What is truth?*” and asks Jesus, “*Are you a king*?” before asking the crowd, “*Shall I crucify your king?*” From the cross Jesus voices that lament raised in the psalm, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” And so here we are on Easter morning with two last questions posed in John’s account of that first Easter day: *Why are you weeping?* and *Whom do you seek?*

They seem like strange questions for this day when our alleluias echo off the walls and fly over the internet. Easter is a glorious time for bright smiles, joyful alleluias, and shouts of “he is risen!” But according to John’s gospel, the first question asked of Mary by both the angels at the tomb and by the risen Jesus whom she thought to be the gardener was not, “*Why are you so happy?”* It was: “*Why are you weeping?”* And then the second question: “*Whom do you seek?”* They are questions entwined in the Easter story and in our response to it.

They are entwined because Mary was weeping over the one she was seeking. She came to the tomb to find the body of her crucified friend and Lord. After three anguished day that began with his arrest and continued through his trial and crucifixion, she was exhausted and sad beyond sad. It is a hard thing to see a friend die in such pain, let alone a friend you believed to be the messiah, a friend who embodied your hopes and dreams for the future. Mary came, seeking his body in the place she expected to find it, and instead found the tomb open and the body missing, presumably stolen. That was more than she could bear, more than anyone should ever have to bear. And so she wept.

*Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning,* says the psalmist. It is tempting to come this Easter morning singing our alleluias and thinking that the weeping is all behind us, that the reality of the cross is washed away by the dawn’s early light. The same might be said of our impatience to put this pandemic behind us. With the arrival of vaccines some seem to think that the weeping is all in the past now, but as this week’s rising COVID numbers indicate, the virus is not yet done with us and the weeping is not yet over. Last year some wept at not being able to gather in person for Easter worship for the first time in their lives; this year some are weeping again because this pandemic has lingered longer than we ever imagined. Between last year’s Easter and this year’s Easter there have been an ocean’s worth of tears shed:

* tears over lost celebrations at birthdays, graduations, and holidays
* tears of longing to see children and grandchildren, parents and grandparents
* tears of loneliness for weeks spent in isolation
* tears of grief for the loss of friends and family to this virus
* tears of frustration at waiting for a vaccine or for life to return to normal
* tears of anger at folks who refuse to wear masks as if the virus was no real threat.

God too sheds tears in this pandemic, and over the suffering in Yemen, Myanmar, and countless refugee camps, and at the grief around more senseless shootings in our nation, and at the hate expressed in the rising tide of racist attacks in our country. This Easter day does not erase the memory or the reality of those tears – for us or for God. And neither did the sunrise on that first Easter day erase the pain of Jesus’ crucifixion.

This Easter day is so bright and joyful because the darkness and pain of Good Friday were so deep; do not forget the events of Good Friday this morning. Do not dwell on them, but do not forget them either. Mary surely didn’t! As she made her way to the tomb, uppermost in her mind were not Jesus’ words about rising on the third day, but the lingering pain and grief she held from watching him die on the cross two days before. What she found at the tomb did little to ease her broken heart and grief-stricken spirit.

What she found was an open tomb. The stone had been rolled away, and Mary feared that Jesus’ body had been stolen – that is what she told Peter and John: “*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him*.” Resurrection was not on her mind – death was – and an empty tomb meant only a missing body, not a risen Lord. Peter and John arrived at the same conclusion, for after racing there at Mary’s urging and entering the tomb and finding the linen burial cloths neatly wrapped, they didn’t stop to wonder: “Who would unwrap the body before stealing it?” They didn’t suddenly recall Jesus’ words about rising on the third day. Finding the tomb empty, they went home, for John says, “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.”

I don’t know if we understand any better how it all happened – the gospel writers give us no account of the resurrection itself, just the empty tomb and the risen Lord – but we believe it! We come to the tomb knowing that it will be empty and knowing why it will be empty; we come to the tomb, not with death on our minds, but with resurrection expectations. We come with Easter eyes that see in the empty tomb, not a source of renewed anguish, but a sign of good news for the world and for us – life in the face of death! For, we know what Mary, Peter, and John did not know that morning – the Lord is risen!

We might never have known that good news had Mary returned to her home as Peter and John did. I can’t imagine we would come together to celebrate the good news of the empty tomb if there was no evidence of a risen Lord! I can’t image us greeting each other with: *The tomb is empty! It is empty indeed!* The joy of Easter is knowing that the tomb is empty because Jesus is risen! That is not what Peter and John understood when they went home pondering what might have happened, but Mary stayed on at the tomb, weeping and waiting for – what? We do not know. We know only that because she was there – in the right place at the right time – she saw the angels and was found by Jesus and came to know the good news of why the tomb was empty

*Why are you weeping? Whom do you seek*? Those questions made more sense to her after Jesus said her name, after her eyes were opened and she recognized him, after she understood what he had said about rising on the third day. She had been weeping at the death of the crucified Jesus. She had sought the body of her crucified Lord. But what she found there was a risen savior, a living Christ; when Jesus spoke her name, “Mary”, her sorrow was turned to joy, to I-can’t-believe-this-is-happening kind of joy. The text says she replied, “Rabboni!” which means teacher, but I expect her tone was really one of wonder and awe: “RABBONI!” as her search for the crucified body was replaced by her encounter with the risen Lord. *Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning!* Those words rang true for Mary there at the tomb, and they have rung true in Holy Weeks across two thousand years. We do not come this morning without the tears of Good Friday on our cheeks and in our minds, but here we find the joy promised by the psalmist, for here we encounter the risen Lord!

Glenn Loury was the first African-American tenured in economics at Harvard. He dined at the White House, rubbed shoulders with leading national figures, and served a President. Life was good. But in 1988 it all came apart with a drug addiction that landed him in a court appointed rehabilitation program. There an outreach worker encouraged him to pray the 23rd Psalm, and in that treasured psalm he began to see the light shining in the darkness as he walked through his own “valley of the shadow of death”. When the outreach worker invited him to attend her AME church on Easter, he accepted though he had not been in church in years. He describes his experience in these words:

*So I am back in church, and there is the music and the rocking and the rhythms of speech and the preaching that I knew as a youth. It was a straight-ahead sermon about the meaning of Easter…I could not stop crying. I wept through the entire thing. I realized, darn it, I sure need saving. I know the depths of my own sin and fallenness. I was just sort of swept away.*”[[1]](#endnote-1)

Why was he weeping? Whom did he seek? The answers were one and the same – the risen Lord who saves us all! Glenn Loury didn’t come to that church seeking a savior, but he found him there. Mary didn’t come to the tomb seeking Jesus, just his crucified body, but she found instead the risen Lord. For whatever reason you came here this day – however you came here this day, virtually or unvirtually – may you find what saints across the ages have found on this day – new hope, new joy, new life, a risen Lord! So let the alleluias ring out! Let the celebration roll on in the midst of this pandemic, despite this pandemic, especially in this pandemic, for Jesus Christ is risen today! He is risen indeed!” Alleluia! Amen

1. “Breaking Ranks”, Richard Higgins, *Christian Century*, December 18-31, 2002, p.32 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)