

Why Are You Crying?

Easter, 2023

John 20: 11 But Mary stood sobbing outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to glance into the tomb. 12 And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. 13 They said to her, “Woman, why are you sobbing?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” 14 Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15 Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you sobbing?? Whom are you seeking?”

Dear Christian Friends,

Why are you crying? That was my question to Jamie, a young lady in her 30's who had camped out in our church office one Sunday morning in between services. She wasn't just crying. She was sobbing in such a way that she could hardly breathe, much less answer my question. Eventually she choked out the awful news she had just received - that her fiancé had been killed in a snowmobile accident the night before. Jamie was talking fast and crying hard and at a certain point she asked me a question I wasn't quite sure how to answer, “Pastor Griffin, what am I going to do?” The best short answer I could come up with was this, “Jamie - today, your assignment is to cry, and to hurt.” The longer answer, of course, was that she could be still and know that God was God. And that her pastors and friends and family would help her to grieve not as those who have no hope, but as those who do. Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

Why are you crying? That was the question of the two angels to Mary early on that first day of resurrection. And it was one of two questions Jesus asked shortly thereafter. Perhaps a better translation would be, “why art thou sobbing?” This is Mary Magdalene, one of at least 5 Marys in the New Testament. We know that she came from the village of Magdala on the shores of the Sea of Galilee. We know that before she met Jesus, she had been possessed by seven demons. We can only imagine how grateful, how appreciative, and how devoted she was to Him. When the soldiers were beating and slapping and striking and ridiculing and taunting and crucifying her Lord, she was watching. When they took her Teacher's body down from the cross, she watched the whole bloody mess. When Joseph of Arimathea was wrapping this body in linen and laying him in the tomb and rolling the heavy stone in place, Mary was watching. No doubt with tears in her eyes, fear in her soul, and anger in her heart.

Why was Mary crying? Keep in mind that by the time the women arrived at the tomb, Jesus had already risen. Already there had been an earthquake, the seal had been broken, and the angels had rolled away the stone. Already the soldiers had been knocked unconscious, woke up, and ran away in fear. Already the women had found the tomb empty, and the angels had announced that Christ was risen. Already the women had told the disciples the good news, but their testimony was dismissed as nonsense. Peter and John had investigated and were believing that the impossible had in fact happened. And Mary Magdalene had returned.

Why was she crying? Did you ever have one of those times when you didn't know whether to laugh or to cry? And so you did both at the same time? Perhaps it was mixture of fond memories and nightmarish ones that were driving her to tears. Perhaps she just loved her Master so much and she felt so helpless and so the only thing she could do was sit down and bawl.

Why are you crying? That was a question one of my neighbors in Lewiston asked me 45 years ago or so. Ida was dying of cancer in those days, and her husband had given me a call and said if I wanted to see her before she passed away, I should come on over. She was a jolly and a kind and a fun sort of a person. Ida was about as strong as she could be in her Christian faith, and when we had done some chit chatting and it was time for me to have a devotion, I started to bawl. Couldn't get any words out at all. She asked me why I was crying and I choked out the obvious reason. Because she was dying. She looked me in the eyes, and she scolded me. She reminded me that she was going to heaven to be with Jesus and she was going to be better than ever. Told me that I should quit my crying, eat some cookies, and drink some coffee. Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Why are you crying? That was my dear mom's question to me about a week before she passed away. I was visiting and praying with her. During one of my little prayers, she dozed off - I know what some of you are thinking! She had a smile on her lips, and I just kept on holding her hand. And I started thinking through so many good memories, from childhood into adulthood, and into the years of grandparenting and grandparenting, and of course, the lump came up in my throat, and I began to cry. She opened her eyes and whispered, "Larry, you're crying." I nodded my head yes. "Why are you crying?" I choked out something to the effect that I loved her and she was dying, that's why. She reminded me that she was going to be with Jesus, she was going to be ok, to which I replied, well that doesn't mean I can't cry about it. Alleluia. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Easter is traditionally more about laughing than it is about crying. More about celebrating the forgiveness of sins and the resurrection of the body and life everlasting than moaning and groaning about the burdens of sin and the curse of death. Which is as it is meant to be. Three Easter truths, I would offer today, in response to whatever is making you sad, whatever is causing those lumps to form in your throats, whatever is keeping you from singing alleluias, whatever is tempting you to sob.

Easter truth #1 is that Jesus is nearby, and He knows us by name. In our text for today, Mary was looking for the Lord, whose body she could not find. She was beside herself with tears. Jesus looked deeply into her heart, when the time was just right, He revealed himself to her. He says to her, “Mary!” And in that instant, she recognizes the voice of her Lord. A voice she thought she would never hear again. A faith that was crushed is revived. Her hope that was gone is restored. And although a thousand questions remained, the important one had been answered.

A broken heart God will never despise. In fact, from beginning to end, Scriptures make it clear that the one true God is attracted to the ones who are crying out for help. Jesus comes close to those who are crying. To those who are crying tears of regret, he draws near with a word of forgiveness. To those crying tears of loneliness, He says I am with you always. To those crying tears of frustration, he says be still and know I am God. To those not even sure why you’re crying, he says I know you by name just keep listening to my voice. To those of you overwhelmed by the darkness all around, the Psalmist points out, For his anger is but for a moment, and his favor is for a lifetime. Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning.

Easter truth #2 is that Jesus is sitting at the right of His Father, and He has news for us to deliver.

It has been said that the greatest crime in the desert is to know where there is water and not tell anybody. Christianity has been described as one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread. In today’s Gospel lesson, angel invited the women on that first Easter Sunday to come and see and then to go quickly and tell the disciples that in fact Christ was risen from the dead. Jesus repeated that word to Mary Magdalene in our text, urging her to stop clinging to him and be going to his brothers and telling them that he will soon be ascending to his father and their father, to his God and their God.

One more time today we celebrate that cynicism and cancer and caskets and crematoriums and cemeteries don’t get the final word around here - our Risen

Savior does! We have news to deliver! Divorce and despair and division and drinking problems and death don't rule the day in this sanctuary and in the hearts of the baptized and believing sons and daughters of our Father in heaven, grace and mercy and the truths of Holy Scripture rule the day. We have news to deliver! Boredom and bitterness and busyness and bickering and braggadocio and brokenness may seem like they are prevailing in our circles of friends and family, but in the family of God, Jesus Christ is alive and well. And because he is alive and well, all things are made new. Or to say it another way, suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces a hope that is built Jesus Christ crucified, dead and buried, risen, ascended, and sitting on the right hand of his father.

Easter truth #3 is to know the value of asking good questions. Throughout the Lenten season we have explored questions like, Paul asking "What does it mean to have the mindset of Christ?" God asking Ezekiel, "Can these bones live?" Disciples asking, "Why was this man born blind?" Moses asking the people "Why do you quarrel with me so much?" And asking God, "What should I do with these people?" Abraham's family asking, "Where are we going?" and "How Much Farther?" God asking Adam, "Where are you?" Who told you that you are naked?" And throughout, God asking us, "Will you trust me?"

Why does Jesus ask so many questions, even though He is omniscient? The short answer is that He asks questions in order to guide and lead our thoughts. Already at age 12, when Mary and Joseph found him in the temple, Mary asked, "Why have you done this to us?" Jesus responds with two questions, "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house and about my Father's business?"

Sometimes he asked questions for comic effect, "Which of you parents, if your child asks for an egg will you give him a stone? Or if our child asks for a fish will you give him a snake? There he would lead us to know that our Father in heaven knows how to give good gifts to us.

When Jesus asks Mary why she is crying, He is reassuring her that He is alive and well. He is leading her to know that her seven demons will not be returning to torment her. He is guiding her into green pastures and beside still waters. He is teaching her that she can quit crying now. Amen