

Sunday; April 24, 2022

Celebrating in a Cemetery

(Series: "From Meetings to Mission")

(Message One)

(John 20:11-18)

Scripture:

¹¹Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

*¹³They 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." ¹⁴At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.*

¹⁵He 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."

*¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary."
She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").*

¹⁷Jesus 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.'"

*¹⁸Mary 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.
(John 20:11-18)*

Message

A **celebration** was the last thing Mary expected when she remained alone outside the empty tomb crying. The last few days had offered her nothing to celebrate.

The Jewish leaders might be able celebrate and they were. Jesus was out of the way! The Roman soldiers might be celebrating. Their work was done. Passover was over. People were leaving town.

But celebrating was the last thing on Mary's heart and mind. Her heart was **broken** from the tragedy of Friday; her mind was **focused** on who had "stolen" Jesus' body.

We've all had days, weeks, months, maybe even years like that where nothing goes right: Car accident, shingles, kidney stones, surgery, pay cut, loss of respect, job loss...

Mary had been there. When people we love suffer and die, we cry, and we cry a lot. She'd heard the leaders clamor for Jesus' blood as she stood outside the courtyard. She'd witnessed the Roman whip rip the skin off her master's back. She'd winced as the thorns sliced his forehead, wept as she saw him buckle under the weight of the cross, and groaned as the hammer struck the nail piercing his hands. She'd sat in the dark, in silence, at the foot of the cross for hours and walked with Joseph as he put Jesus into the tomb on Friday just before the sun set...

Anthony Van Dyck captures the passion of Mary of Magdala holding her hands and lips against the bleeding feet of her master (**pic**).

It is not at all surprising to realize Mary as the last one to leave the tomb on Friday or be the first one to come early on Sunday morning. Jesus had transformed her life. **Mark (16:9)** notes that Jesus had cast seven demons from her. She had followed Jesus closely since that day; **Luke (8:3)** lists her among Jesus' disciples.

It is surprising that she had forgotten the promises Jesus had made about his resurrection, but then, so had everyone else.

So, "*She stayed right there, just outside the tomb, crying and crying.*" She had stayed with Jesus until the very end – a model of unwavering devotion and undaunting courage. She was not leaving. "*Staying right there*" discipleship recalls the word, Jesus had used in **John 15** – the word, "abide." Jesus most sought-after form of faith, i.e., his "definition" of discipleship, is "*to abide.*"

Maybe that is why Jesus chose to appear to Mary of Magdala first – instead of his mother, or the beloved disciple, or James or Peter. Mary models "abiding" and discipleship.

THE SURPRISE

Between her tears, Mary feels drawn toward the empty tomb – either in **hope or in curiosity - and she sticks her head into the entrance and looks inside.** We intuitively know we cannot just continue to cry. At some point, we

must do something. Like Mary, we're searching for meaning in the chaos of life.

And her "move" is rewarded. Mary sees two angelic figures inside. One is sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the slab Jesus' body would have occupied. It is a picture of the (Old Testament) Tabernacle's Mercy Seat (or "Atonement Cover;" cf. **Exodus 25:17-22**, NIV) with a cherub on either side of where the One Great Sacrifice for the sin of the world had laid – the executed Lord Jesus Christ. The Mercy Seat, placed on top of the Ark of the Covenant, represented the place where sins were forgiven, where atonement was made, so God could meet with his people.

And there were people to meet inside. They asked her, "*Why are you crying?*"

"*Why are you crying?*" is an uncommon question to ask in a cemetery; it is superfluous; it is unnecessary. It could even be considered rude (unless, of course, the questioner knows something the questionee doesn't). Here, the question is compassionate and pastoral.

Mary's reply is plausible, exactly what one would expect: "*They have taken my Lord away and I don't know where they have put him.*" (**20:13b**). As far as Mary knows, Jesus died the death of a **failed** Messiah, his lips are still **silent**, and his body now appears to have been **stolen** off by grave robbers. But Jesus is still "**Lord**" to Mary, even in death.

Such **devotion** moves Jesus; it moves him closer to her. He is now so close she can hear his breathing. She turns and there he stands.

Mary "sees" Jesus, but she thinks he is the gardener. Her non-recognition of Jesus should not surprise us. With her tear-swollen eyes, the early morning hour, perhaps the sun in her eyes, and the fact no one expects to be talking to a resurrected person, we can easily excuse Mary's incomprehension.

Our struggles, our pain, our grief often prevent us from seeing Jesus even though he is right there next to us. Jesus could have revealed himself at this point. But he **doesn't**. He could have called an angelic chorus to announce his resurrection as his Father did to announce his birth. But he doesn't.

Instead, he asks the same sympathetic question the angels did, "*Woman, why are you crying?*" and then he goes a bit deeper, "*Who is it you are looking for?*"

Thinking he is the gardener, she replies, "*Sir, if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, so I can come and get him.*" Mary wants only one thing; Mary wants to be as close to Jesus as possible.

Her reply is eminently reasonable: Where is Jesus? He belongs here! Please

don't disrespect even his dead body, nor his rightful presence in this place. Something is wrong here.

Jesus doesn't leave Mary **wondering** for long – he never does when we earnestly seek him, he pauses just long enough to remind us he loves to **surprise** us. He waits for us to **despair** of our human strength and then **intervenes** with his divine strength; he waits for us to realize we can't solve it and then – surprise!

How long has it been since you let God **surprise** you? It's easy to reach the point where we think we have God all figured out. We think we know exactly what God does and will do. We have charted his tendencies.

We see God as we see our computer: push the right buttons, insert the right data, and God will do exactly what we think he should do. Or God is like a juke box. Insert your tithe. Punch in the right numbers and—boom—the divine music we want fills the room.

There is a box of tissues in my office. Periodically people will stop in, sit around my table, and use them.

- A wife confesses her husband continues to both verbally and physically abuse her; the tears come easily. What does she do now? Where is Jesus?
- A father, whose wife died of cancer leaving him with three young children to raise, wants a word of hope. Jesus seems so far away!
- They have prayed for their son for decades, but instead of embracing Jesus, he seems to be moving farther and farther away. It feels like their prayers are just bouncing off the ceiling.

Our world is full of Marys - people who are all wrapped up in life's sorrows and perplexities and who find themselves looking into empty tombs because of disappointed hopes and crushed expectations.

But John reminds us that God is at his **best** when life is at its **worst**; God has even been known to plan a **celebration** in a **cemetery**! Get ready. You may be in for a surprise!

- Hear the rocks meant for the body of the adulterous woman drop to the ground...
- Listen to the Rabbi who invited “dropouts” to be his disciples, who put a zealot and a Roman sympathizer in the same small group. (What was he thinking?)
- Listen as Messiah whispers to the Samaritan woman, “*I who you speak to am he.*”

- Listen to the one who had no place to lay his head – bow his head, pray, and then feed thousands from a little boy's lunch and still have leftovers.
- Listen to the widow from Nain eating dinner with her son who was once dead.
- Listen as Jesus invites a death row convict to ride with him into the kingdom in the front seat of a heaven-bound limo.
- Listen as Mary's name is spoken by a man she loved—a man she had seen crucified and buried.

God appears in the **strangest** of places and does the **strangest** of things. He stretches frowns into smiles, replaces tears with twinkles, hangs bright stars in dark skies, substitutes rainbows for thunder clouds. He calls out our name and sponsors celebrations in the midst of a cemetery.

Don't miss an important truth in this text. Mary didn't find Jesus; Jesus found Mary. (The Shepherd doesn't wait for the lamb to find its way home; the shepherd goes listening for the cry of the lamb; he seeks out the lamb; the lamb's cry brings the Shepherd to the lamb).

THE SHATTERING

Jesus then offers his shortest (and most dramatic) sermon: "*Miriam*."

The Good Shepherd knows his sheep and "*calls them by name*" and his sheep "*know his voice*" (**John 10:3-4; 14-15**).

One word, her own name, spoken by the most significant person she had ever known, and it changed her whole life – forever.

"*Miriam*," he said softly. She recognized the voice. Hearing your name is a wonderful thing.

The name we love hearing when we walk in the house after a hard day of work and the kids come running into our arms; the stress of the day disappears.

The name we love to hear after we have been waiting in line for an eternity and our name is called – the wait is over; the time has come. Finally!

Now imagine hearing your name from the lips of Jesus. The clouds part, the darkness turns to light. The resurrection of Jesus Christ has suddenly become very personal in the calling of her name.

She turns around. "*Surprise!*" In the second it took to turn, her life moved from B.C. to A.D. A second before she turned, she was in deep despair

face to face with death (and the grave); a second after she turned, she was face to face with the death-conquering central figure of history.

Mary's grief is instantly **shattered**. She is the first person to ever encounter the personal presence of the Risen Lord.

She responds to his one word with one word: *Rabboni*, i.e., **My Teacher**. She could have said, "Savior!" "Son of God!" or "Divine Lord." She chooses *Rabboni*; the same word she used to define their relationship before he died, before he was raised.

Six syllables: *Mi-ri-am. Rab-bo-ni*. And the whole world **changes**. Death has met its match. There is a reality (Jesus) that is more final than death.

Surprise!

That is what this garden, this cemetery, this Mary meeting is all about. If this really happened (and it did); it changes everything. It guarantees us there is a resurrection; there is life after death; the One we mourn we will see again. A ray of **hope** breaks through our sorrow and **grief**.

Mariam is overwhelmed. It's not often you hear your name spoken by an eternal tongue. But when he did, she recognized it. She responds by embracing Jesus. One can only imagine the length of this embrace.

And then Jesus says, "*Please do not keep holding on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father.*" (20:17) Numerous translations ignore the present tense imperative of this verb; the word in this tense means to cease doing something one is presently doing. The tense carries with it a sense of urgency.

Jesus has quite naturally allowed Mary to embrace him (in a few verses, he will allow Thomas to touch his wounds.). Jesus is not an untouchable ghost; he is a real and affectionate human being. So he allows Mary to embrace him. We all long for that embrace, for Jesus' assurance; for an expression of his love – a reminder he has not left us.

We've usually understood Jesus' statement here about "*not holding on*" to mean that Mary should let go of **Jesus** so he can be about **his work**; that is, Mary will have to adapt to Jesus' new relationship with her through his Spirit. That makes some sense in the immediate context.

But in the broader context (including for us today) it seems better understood as Jesus telling Mary to let go because **she** needs to be engaged in Jesus' work and Mission. We, too, need to let go...so we, in obedience, can share Jesus and be about completing his mission.

Jesus gives Mary the first act of mission: tell the disciples. "Go tell my brothers, I am ascending to my Father and to your Father, to my God and

to your God.” (John 20:17) (The Mission will continue to expand: “*You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem (i.e., the brothers) and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” Cf. **Acts 1:8b.**)

In all four of the Gospels, when one meets Jesus, one is given a mission. As Mary is just now learning, the Christian faith is not just “Jesus and **Me**.” It is also Jesus and **Mission**. It is Jesus and **others**. It is Jesus and the **Harvest**. It is Jesus and His **world**.

Mary’s first post-resurrection “assignment,” was to **tell** the disciples, i.e., “*Go tell my brothers* what has happened.” The term “brothers” underscores an intimate act of adoption and affection. Disciples are not just followers and friends; Jesus makes them a part of his family. And yet, as we learned in our study of the Disciples’ (Lord’s) Prayer, Jesus’ relationship to his Father remains unique. Jesus maintains the “my Father-your Father” distinction.

Mary announces to the disciples, “*I have seen the Lord!*” She is the first person privileged to say these words in John. If her announcement is true, there is Gospel. Christ’s mission is to bring that Gospel to each other, to our neighbors, and to all nations (cf. **Matthew 28:19-20; John 20:21**). Sadly, her announcement to Jesus’ “brothers” wasn’t well received by the disciples, as so often the message isn’t. (“*These words seem to be utter nonsense...*” **Luke 24:11.**) But this should never keep us from giving witness to what we have seen and heard.

THE CELEBRATION

As we grow older, life’s **struggles** increasingly weigh on us. The concerns, skepticisms, griefs, sufferings, betrayals, and losses mount and take their toll. They slow us down. Our innocence disappears as does our enthusiasm and energy; it is not uncommon to sit down for a good cry.

All too often we feel like Mary (or Miriam), a people without hope; like disciples who ran away after his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. We feel like life is done, over, finished, irreversible. And we are paralyzed by a heavy heart.

Then comes the best part. This scene has all the elements of a great surprise. Notice the secrecy, the wide eyes, the amazement, the gratitude.

It is a resurrection. The tomb was **empty**! Yet it was full of Hope! The **celebration** is on! What was dead is alive. Despair has been replaced with Hope!

Come join Peter, John and Mary in the cemetery. The only place you can find real hope, lasting peace, and a reason to celebrate is beside an **empty** tomb. And the only place to find an empty tomb is in a **cemetery**! And then, go with the news that *"You have seen the Lord."*

And understand, this celebration **pales** in comparison to one that is still to **come**. It will be like Mary's – but even more amazing. More graves will be open. More knees will bow. More criers will be surprised. More Christ-followers will celebrate.

It is going to be a surprising celebration! I'm on the guest list. I hope you are too.

Remember, *"No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."* **(1 Corinthians 2:9)**.

Prayer:

Father, thank you for conquering death and providing us with an opportunity to find hope and celebrate in a world surrounded by suffering and death. Thank you for finding us in our deepest need, for encouraging us with a still small word, for allowing us to embrace you, for adopting us as your children. Now, Lord, send us on your mission to bring Your Gospel – to one another and to your world. In Jesus' name. Amen.