

## “When Jesus Speaks: Why are you Weeping?”

21 April 2019: Easter Sunday  
Salado UMC—Salado, Texas 76571  
Preaching Text: John 20:11-18

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“Death . . . it’s the only thing we haven’t succeeded in completely vulgarizing”

(—Aldous Huxley, 1894—1963: *Eyeless in Gaza*, 1936).

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Easter is both a day and a season. What is unusual about Easter is that we do not have *what God gives to us* at Easter as much as we have *what God does for us* at Easter. We don’t enjoy a quantifiable possession as much as a sacred relationship—active and dynamic. As long as God abides with us and for us, there is never a life circumstance beyond God’s ability to resurrect and heal. This is what Easter means—the dead in us can arise again. But if this is all true, then we need to take a moment so that we neither trivialize nor sentimentalize our relationship with God.

I fondly remember “my Easter Congregant,” a person I would like to apologize to because he told me every Easter Sunday after my first two years at that church: “Preacher, you don’t have much of an imagination. Every time I come to church, you preach on the resurrection.” So, to my friend I simply say, “Here we go again.” Hear our lesson from John’s Gospel:

**[11] But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; [12] and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. [13] They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." [14] When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.**

**[15] Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." [16] Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher). [17] Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' ” [8] Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her” (John 20:11-18).**

Before dawn on that Sabbath morning, Mary Magdalene arrives at the tomb. She, of course, discovers that someone has moved the “stone” used as a “security lock” to protect the cave from crypt/grave robbers. Mary and the others suspect someone has removed Jesus’ body. Mary returns to the tomb after Simon Peter and “the other disciple” return home. In grief, Mary sees “two angels in white” whom we suppose are heavenly messengers (GK: *angelos*). After an exchange with them, she recognizes Jesus when he calls her by name. Mary and Jesus are now in a new relationship: “do not hold on to me” Jesus tells her. Mary then returns after this encounter with the Risen Christ and tells the disciples: “I have seen the Lord!”

For John's Gospel, Jesus' crucifixion, resurrection, exaltation, and return to heavenly glory, as well as Jesus' ascension, are of one cloth. This is the obvious contour of the story, but I want to guide us to a specific set of places. I want to offer three primary reflections among many we can observe from this text (John 20:11-18).

**First, the angels say to Mary—and then Jesus asks the same exact question: “Woman, why are you weeping?”** Mary weeps because she thinks someone has stolen the body of her Messiah, Jesus. On many levels we see this as an absurd question. In truth, human beings have much over which to weep.

The late Elisabeth Kubler-Ross was a psychiatrist and author of a pioneering book *On Death and Dying*. Although many experts have discounted her findings, she nonetheless outlined the stages of the grief process. The five stages progress through a grieving person's denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally, acceptance. Whether or not one agrees with Kubler-Ross' stages, part of any human life-cycle is a series of “getting and losing.” The things we get/lose can be health, relationships, or accomplishments. In some cases, the loss of our material possessions—initiated by a tornado or onset of hail for example—can unleash a sequence of grief. If we retain certain relationships, then there is no grief. Yet, when life changes occur, then we grieve what we no longer possess. Examples of change that initiates grief may be a person's coping as an “empty-nester,” losing money in ill-fated investments, having a spouse die, or facing a terminal illness. What we grieve when a physician offers a diagnosis of a threatening disease is the loss of ordinary health. We each have moments of discontent and loss—all of us. Mary Magdalene weeps because “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

**Second, notice in John's story that God has done everything before either the disciples or Mary arrive on the cemetery scene.** That is, prior to human beings entering into the story's details, God completed Jesus' resurrection. Easter occurs before the witnesses witness. We Methodists call this circumstance: Prevenient grace.

Prevenient grace is what John Wesley called the grace that “runs before us” and meets us in our time of need. For this reason, those who subscribe to Wesleyan theology believe that all people, young or old, may receive the sacrament of baptism. For God's acceptance of us is not dependent on how we feel or think about God or even to what extent we recognize the gift of God's amazing grace. Rather, we simply grasp baptism because God calls us to be God's children. Later, in the case of infants baptized and on the occasion of confirmation, God affords an opportunity to accept for ourselves a vow made on our behalf as infants. But whether or not we actually accept God's gracious invitation to us, God, even so, claims us and seeks us all our days. God's grace always “goes in front” of us to protect us and bless us. Consequently, we need not necessarily witness or understand grace to live in it.

**Third, one of the astonishing things about this resurrection story for Mary and disciples is this: They and we did not have to do a thing.** This fact is why John's story sums up the gospel. Jesus' resurrection appearance to Mary is a pure gift. God's final decisive revelation of what God is up to in the world involves raising a dead person to life. There is no stranger, nor odder, story than this one.

Paul addresses this oddity in Romans, writing: “I am not ashamed of the gospel” (Romans 1:16). Why does Paul write this? Perhaps Paul writes to the Roman church so that he can boast in the gospel (borne out by Romans 3:27). This verse asks “Then what becomes of boasting?” Boasting, the way Paul uses it, draws attention to the pride that people have in their possessions or abilities.

Yet, Paul wipes out every pretension of human pride by reminding believers that everything they have and are is from God's gracious generosity. One of these assets is the state of salvation that God offers. Salvation's power comes directly from God. God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Thus, the gospel as effectual for salvation may seem like high comedy to non-believers. After all, the authorities crucify Jesus as a common criminal. If nothing else, crucifixion induces shame—not boasting.

Still, Paul reminds readers that God gives salvation as a gift. We do not occasion our salvation; rather God gives it as a bequest. All this simply means is what Paul means when he writes: "They are now justified by his grace as a gift" (Romans 3:24).

Like many folks, perhaps you believe a lot of things that you do not fully understand: love, loyalty, friendship, redemptive suffering, and of course, the resurrection. There are many things we simply cannot understand. Perhaps resurrection is one of these. Baptist theologian Carlyle Marney and Wesleyan Albert Outler once talked of life and death. Marney said to SMU professor and renowned Wesley scholar: "Albert, some days I don't much believe in the resurrection." And the wise old Outler replied—"Marney, don't worry about believing it today. But know that the day will come when you die or someone you love dies—then you will believe it and it will be the right time."

We all have experienced the loss of a loved one. Each one of us has attended memorial services coveting resurrection joy. Some of us experience it, others do not, because only faith can take us there. A favorite professor at Perkins School of Theology, SMU, was Ronald Sleeth who possessed a contagious attitude about life. He enjoyed every moment of God's creation. Ron believed every sermon ought to have a sports illustration. He once told a class that if he had wanted a life with more "meaning," he would have been a local grocery store carry-out boy. That way he could relate to people on a real level. Often, we would see him dancing around the SMU campus. His enthusiasm for life was refreshing and based on his faith. In the mid-1980's, when I was much younger, I learned that Dr. Sleeth had succumbed to terminal cancer. His death stunned me. How could death win when Ronald Sleeth was so full of life?

Just before Sleeth's death, his wife, Natalie, wrote a song called *Hymn of Promise*. The song so captivated Dr. Sleeth that he requested using it at his memorial service. I cannot think of a more apt tribute to Ron Sleeth, nor a better way to move people toward the understanding of resurrection. You can find it on page 707 of our *United Methodist Hymnal*.

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