

Why Are You Weeping? John 20:11-18

Well, we have seen Mary Magdalene come to the tomb and discover the stone rolled away, and the tomb was empty, and then we see she goes and finds two of the disciples — John and Peter. They rush to the tomb, and see the grave clothes undisturbed, and you can imagine the thoughts that went through their minds. Could it be true? Could Jesus be alive? Could he have risen from the dead? They go home, and then we come to Mary who comes back to the tomb. As she comes back we see the first appearance of Jesus after his resurrection in the gospel of John, and it is to all people Mary. This really speaks to the authenticity of the text because we expect, if we were writing the text or if the disciples were making up the resurrection that the first witnesses would be the disciples themselves. Men were looked upon in that ancient culture as better and more reliable witnesses.

And there is a couple things that draws her back to the tomb, and they are love and hopelessness. Her love is all she had, or at least she thought she had to hold onto. She loved her Lord. It was Jesus who had exercised the demons from her and gave her freedom and liberty. She never thought he would hang and be executed on a Roman cross. And when you look at her grief at the tomb of Jesus, it gives evidence of his death. There is no possibility that they will see him again, at least in the natural sense. Death has a way of terminating hope. We think that life will be different. People say things to try to take the sting and pain away. Your loved one will always be with you. But death is so final. It is so complete. It terminates any life or any hope of being with that person again. That is why the grief and the pain is so real and so agonizing.

If you lived long enough, you know the pain of death. You have experienced personally and also with those around you. And here is the thing — the greater the love, the greater the pain. Mary's sorrow is hard to really look at or even be the presence of because she deeply love the Lord Jesus. But our grief now as believers is different in two ways. One is that the resurrection of Christ changes everything, especially when we grieve those who are in the faith who have died. Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14, **"But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep."** Paul says if you are uninformed or if you are ignorant or forget or ignore these truths you will grieve like those around you. But here is the truth — when we remember, Jesus' death and resurrection changes everything. We have a faith that transcends this life. In fact, he even goes on and says that we will not all sleep. And even though it is difficult in our grief not to be hopeless, we have to press on in our minds a different message, and that message is undeniable and sturdy and glorious hope. Death is not an end or darkness or the midnight of our lives, but just the beginning.

The second way our grief is different is we realize in all of life God is in control. And one of the most impressive features about the gospel of John and even the passion narratives of the last couple of chapters is the absolute control of God and even Jesus Christ. He is the one who is sovereign, not Caiaphas or the religious leaders, and not Pilate, but Christ and him alone. And if he can control this much evil

and work it for his glory and my good, then my life, and the disappointments, and the grief and the loss, which from a human perspective might seem incidental and pointless and hopeless, I know he knows what he is doing. And there is purpose and reason, and that reason is not just for his glory but my highest good. Everything that has happened, although Mary does not realize it is for her good, even though she is in the midst of so much grief.

And I want us to begin to look at her grief, and really see that the solution to grief, it does not take it away, but it does cause us to grieve differently, and that is in faith and hope. Mary loved the Lord Jesus, and the three great attributes of Christianity are faith, hope, and love, but love needs to be sustained and saturated with faith and hope. You see so wonderfully the tenderness of our Saviour to bring her to that place of greater hope and greater faith in him, which even leads to greater love. What has captured your heart in grief? Look with the eyes of faith to see our sovereign Lord who loves you, who came and died and rose again. He really does change everything.

1. First, we need to understand our grief. Vv. 11-13

We all know what it is to grieve. And God has given us the emotion of grief for our good. Not to grieve in certain situations would really speak of our uncaring and ungodly attitudes. The reason so often we grieve deeply is because we do love deeply and therefore we care deeply. I think we all know that. But the difficult thing about grief is that it is so emotional, draining, and therefore can be confusing. And because it is so confusing, there are messages that we give ourselves or we tell ourselves in the midst of that grief that actually heightens our grief or complicates our grief. And sometimes we just have to stop and say to ourselves — what do I really believe? What message am I telling myself that is false? What do I know about who Christ is and what he has promised? All of us in grief are preaching some kind of message into our hearts and lives that is really affecting how we grieve, and where our comfort or lack will come.

Mary's grief is so intense. She has been before the cross, and now she comes back before the tomb. Looks at verse 11 again, **“But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb.”** Think of the anguish of this poor lady, but think of why she is here. She is here because this was the last place that the dead body of Jesus was seen. Maybe the body has been returned. Maybe the body was placed back in. And it is incredible because in the midst of his pain and agony that is her fleeting and weak and desperate hope. Her hope is not among the living but among the dead. And she peers into the tomb, and what she sees should give her hope, like Peter and John, but it really doesn't because in her overwhelming grief is preaching a different message. Look at how the text continues, because it really is an interesting verse, **“And she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.”** Here are two angelic messengers from God, and here we read they were dressed in white. These would have been the two angels that had appeared earlier in that morning. The women came to the tomb, found the stone was rolled away, and Mary departs to get Peter and John, but the other women remain and these two angels appear, and they announce that he is not here but he has risen. The women leave, Peter and John arrive, and then depart after seeing the signs of resurrection, and then Mary comes to the tomb again. But she is not alone.

Now let me point a couple of things out. And one is where the angels are sitting and how they are sitting. They are sitting where the body of Jesus lay. One at the head and one where his feet would be. And I do find this so interesting, that this is so emblematic of what is known as the mercy seat. The mercy seat was overlaid with gold, and it had one either end a cherub or angel with its face covered. And listen to what God says through Moses about the mercy seat in Exodus 25:22, **“There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the testimony, I will speak with you about all that I will give you in commandment for the people of Israel.”** Isn’t it amazing! Christ is the true meeting place for God and man. He is the reason we can come into the very presence of God. It is through Christ and only in Christ we can come into the presence of God.

Also notice the position of these men is that they are sitting. This is the only place in Scriptures where we have angels sitting. Sitting is the posture of rest and inactivity. And the reason for the sitting of these angelic creatures is that Jesus Christ really has accomplished it all. Through the death, burial and resurrection of Christ — all has been done. We now stand complete in him. The door is open in the tomb, the way and access to God is forever open through Christ.

The other question we should ask is why didn’t Peter and John see the angels. The angels were there for the women in the early morning, and they are there now for Mary to see, so we assume be there when the two disciples arrive, so why did they not see them? Psalm 91:11 is certainly referencing Jesus, **“For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways.”** So why didn’t they see them? And I do not think that the answer is difficult, and it is that they did not make themselves known. Angelic creatures can manifest themselves by God’s will or remain invisible. Listen to Hebrews 1:14, **“Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?”** Angels are probably more involved in our lives than we think. And here is where we see the love and grace of Christ. When the two disciples entered the tomb, they didn’t need the appearance of these angels. They knew Jesus had risen. God in his goodness gave the appearance of these angels to rekindle the faith and hope of Mary in the midst of her grief.

But here is the thing about grief — it really is hard to penetrate. No doubt you think two angels sitting on the tomb, dressed in dazzling white, along with the missing body of Christ might have lifted her spirits or caused her to consider a different message. But grief often comes with a faulty message that will not let go. So look at verse 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.’”** What a great question asked by the angels. Angels in their glorified and sinless state and having never known the full range of human emotions, and the battles we have with faith and trusting must often be perplexed at our emotions and when we have them. They know who Jesus is. They know what he came to do, and even what he promised so clearly over and over again. They know he said after three days he would rise, but no one seems to have gotten the message. Mary in all her love and devotion to Christ had a faulty faith. She didn’t get the message even though she heard it. No doubt they ask this question to challenge her belief system. This is the message sent by God, but also because they see no reason for her sorrow. There are times and good

reasons to sorrow but this is not one of them. The tomb is empty. All that is left are the grave clothes, which tells a message. This is a time of rejoicing and not grief.

And look at Mary's grief and answer here, **"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."** Now the Jews honoured the body of the dead and it was a great sin to somehow desecrate the body of the deceased. And we can excuse Mary and her grief. We have all been there. We have all been in the throws of overwhelming anguish and sorrow and it is really hard to think right — to see clearly and rightly and biblically. But think of this whole scenario because she is not looking up. She is looking down. Think how limited her hope is and how in the end it would bring very limited, and at the best momentary comfort. She is looking not for the living Lord, but for his dead body. Our lives are a constant mix of love and faith, and unbelief. All of those working in us. And often we miss how great the comfort is when we simply look up rather than look down. And no doubt the world and the grief of living in this fallen reality has come in your life. Let me ask you in the confusion that often accompanies grief. Where are you looking? Are you looking up or are you looking down? Are we truly looking through the eyes of faith or through the eyes of some limited and momentary hope that is earthly and fleeting? Oh Christian, yes we grieve but not like those who have no hope. Look to Christ. Don't add grief to grief by looking away from Christ. He truly is our everlasting comfort and balm. No one ever loved like Jesus, and no one can give more comfort and hope than our Lord. It is time to look up.

2. So let's see if we can look up and just provide some encouragements from this text.

One is to recognize that sin and unbelief still live in your hearts. There still are pockets in our life where the words and promises of Christ just do not seem to bring the comfort and joy. There are still areas in our lives where we look to earthly comforts rather than the comfort of Christ — his love, sovereignty, and promises and plan in our lives. And we often have a hybrid faith if I can call it that. Again it is a mixture of faith and unbelief existing in our hearts at the same time. You see this in Mary right here. Because it is a test when the angels ask why she is grieving. Listen to not only the answer she gives but the title she gives Jesus. Look at verse 13 again, **"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.'"** Now look at that title. They have taken away — my Lord. Do you see a couple things. One is that Jesus is Lord. This is more than a title of respect, but the Greek word here is used of God over and over. He is the great God who has come in human flesh. He is the Maker and Sustainer and Ruler of all. And he is "my Lord," not just "the Lord." In other words, this is personal. He is my God, my hope, my saviour. He is my Lord. Yet where is she looking for him? And she is looking for the Lord of glory among the dead. There is no hope in a dead God, which is a contradiction in terms.

We often sing the song, Take it to the Lord in prayer. One of stanzas go, **"Oh what peace we often forget all because we do not take it to the Lord in prayer."** And that is so true. It is distrust to think that we could handle all the difficulties and trials and even the griefs on our own. But isn't it amazing that often we bereft ourselves of so much peace and so much comfort because we just do not remind ourselves of who the Lord is and what he has accomplished and what he has promised in our lives?

Don't we miss so much joy in the midst of sorrows because we just do not look into our hearts and minds, and really question what message we are telling ourselves? Think of your problems right now. My Lord lives and he is in control! My problems and sorrows have an expiration date. And I have a future beyond my comprehension where the former things like tears and sorrows will be obliterated forevermore. Mary, if he is Lord, then believe what he told you. He is not among the dead but among the living just as he told. In your frustrations and anguish of life what has God already told you?

The second thing we can take away from this is the question that was asked by the angels — **“why are you weeping?”** Again, this is the message that God wanted the angels to ask to help in-still in her a greater faith and trust in the Lord and the promises that were given to her. We realize that this question is even repeated by our Lord. So really it is an x-ray question to get her to think, not about the externals and what is going on around her — her environment and the people in her life. The angels knew on one level, and certainly the Lord of glory knew why she was weeping, but again the question is deeper, what are you believing?

Now think of it because we often want to ask that very question of God of “Why” when things happen in our lives. Why Lord have you allowed this? Why have you sent these trials in my life? But often we do not ask the question of “why” to ourselves in all our responses in life. Think about it because our faith, trust, and hope in Christ are meant to change us. Our theology is meant to be practical and transformative. Our Lord is forever with us and he makes all the difference. So do we ever ask the question of ourselves about our responses in life? It really helps us see those pockets of unbelief. Why am I so angry? Why did I say those words to those I profess to love? It would be easy to answer like Mary and emphasize our environment or the people in our lives. We blame fatigue or our spouse or children or whatever. But why are you angry? Do you believe God is sovereign and the great lover of your soul? Do you believe he has purpose and you are called to trust in him? Anger is a emotional response to us trying to take control. It has nothing to do with the presence and promises and trusting Christ. If this is who Jesus is than why the angry outburst?

We could look at other emotions and sins in our lives, why am I so discouraged or so depressed or so hopeless? Is not Jesus with me? Hasn't he promised me his glory and one day I will be with him? Doesn't he have purpose and glorious reasons for every adversity in our lives? You see asking “why” not of God but of ourselves is such a great X-ray question to really see the unbelief in our lives to help us walk toward belief in Christ. Mary, why are you weeping? Be honest with yourself. It is so easy to blame our environment and people in our lives. So often the lack of comfort and direction comes from our own hearts and those pockets of unbelief that we are often blind to because we are not looking for them.

You see the Psalmist does this in Psalm 42. First his complaint is against God. Where is God and why am I going through this adversity and pain? Verse 3 says, **“My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’”** The whole thought is my greatest battle is outside of me. And there is a mixture of anger and frustration and hopelessness, and at the same time a recognition that God is real, present and personal. There is that mixture of unbelief and faith. But listen to how he changes the questioning away from God to what he knows about God, and begins to question himself rather than God, and it is here where hope

is found, verse 11, **“Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God.”**

Listen to that word and where it is directed — Hope in God. And listen to the glory that hope brings — “For I shall again praise him.” Based on who God is, my trials have purpose and an expiration date. And the whole reason for this change begins with the question “why” — “Why are you cast down, oh my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me?” Where do you and where do I need to start asking ourselves questions, not our circumstances and people in our lives or how God could allow this to happen, but about ourselves?

So God has really given us the gift of grieving. We see Mary grieved here, and we even see in this gospel Jesus wept before the tomb of Lazarus. And the one thing grieving points us to as believers amazingly enough is hope. In grieving, whether of a relationship that is not what it is meant to be, or the death and separation of a loved one, or some kind of medical prognosis or whatever — grief indicates this is not the way it is supposed to be. It actually points us away from the things here toward the message of that vacated tomb. There is change coming. And when we place our minds on the Person of that change it is incredible that even in the midst of our tears there is such abundant hope and change in our own hearts. But it all starts in what message we are telling ourselves. Why are you cast down my soul? Hope in this great God, because there is coming a day when grieving will be put to death. God is so so good!