

Easter Sunday  
March 31, 2013  
Dr. Stephen C. Brewer

## “WHY ARE YOU WEeping?”

John 20:1-18

A pastor went to see a man who lived in the community but never came to church. “We would love to have you come to our church,” he said to the man.

“I can’t, I don’t have any good clothes,” the man replied with downcast eyes.

The pastor thought a moment and then said, “If I talk with the deacons and we get you some new clothes, will you promise to go to church?” The man said he would. Well the deacons collected nearly \$500 and the pastor went right out and bought the man a new suit and took it to him.

“Now,” the pastor said, “you *will* go to church on Sunday, right?”

“I sure will, Pastor,” the man said, smiling at the new suit.

Well the next Sunday came and the pastor looked out over the congregation but the man was not there. So he went to the man’s house that afternoon and the man answered the door wearing his new suit. “I thought you said that if we got you a new suit you would go to church!” the pastor said, with a little more anger in his voice than he would have liked.

The man smiled and said, “Well, Pastor, I did go to church. But you see, when I put on this here new suit I looked so darned classy and successful that I went to the Episcopal Church!”

If you were with us for worship Thursday for the Seder meal, or at the ecumenical Good Friday Service—or even if you were with the Episcopalians—then you have walked with the disciples as they accompanied Jesus in his last week on this earth. With them you have witnessed Jesus’ last meal, his betrayal and arrest in the garden, his trials before Herod and Pilate, and finally his crucifixion.

Now, on this Easter Sunday we accompany Mary Magdalene to the tomb of Jesus, and a question is before us: who is it we are looking for? Mary thought she knew, but she met someone she did not expect.

Cases of mistaken identity happen—even in graveyards. There was a young minister, fresh out of seminary. And he had been asked to go to the cemetery to perform a brief committal service for an old man, a Mr. Smith, who had recently died. He was informed that there were no surviving family members; he and the funeral director would be the only ones at the cemetery. And so he arranged to meet the funeral director at noon that day. But on his way to the cemetery, somehow the minister got his directions confused, and when he finally got to the cemetery, it was well past one. Assuming the funeral director had gone ahead without him and distraught that he had bungled his very first assignment, the young minister started to leave, but then he noticed some freshly dug earth in the distance. A couple of workers were sitting under a nearby tree, with their shovels lying on the ground. So the minister walked over to the spot where they had been working, offered a beautiful committal service, closing with a reverent and heart-felt prayer extolling all the virtues Mr. Smith had, and a few he didn’t have. When the final “Amen” was said, the young minister wiped the perspiration from his brow, nodded politely to the workers and started back to his car. Under the tree, one of the workers looked at the other and said: “You think we should tell him that Mr. Smith is in section four, and that he just prayed over a septic tank?”<sup>1</sup>

Now there was no disciple more loyal than Mary Magdalene; none more intimately attached to Jesus in his earthly ministry. Yet when he stood before her that Easter morning she did not know him. We shouldn’t be too hard on Mary. Every time I read an account of the

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<sup>1</sup> As told by C. Edward Bowen

resurrected Jesus in any of the gospels I am struck by one fact: when the risen Jesus appears, his closest followers usually don't recognize him.

It makes me wonder if Peter, in his statements of denial on the night Jesus was arrested, wasn't prophetic in an ironic kind of way when three times he blurted out, "I don't know him!" You see, the Jesus Peter knew always had the right thing to say to even the most clever adversary, yet he had said nothing in his own defense. The Jesus Peter knew could calm storms, heal the sick and save people from demons, yet he had stood by doing nothing while the soldiers had mocked him and beaten him and nailed him to a cross. Did he know Jesus?

What was true for Peter was also true for Mary. The Jesus Mary knew had been vibrantly and passionately alive—had been the very essence of life. But on Friday Mary had stood by and watched as he had died in agony, unable to save himself. Unbelievably, impossibly, he had died. As if to prove to herself that it was really true, here she was at first light to prepare the body herself. And now there wasn't even a body. There was nothing left of him at all. And so she wept. Had she even known this man whom she had followed so faithfully?

Then Jesus appeared to her. I will not say that she was looking for a dead Jesus, and that is why she didn't recognize him. I believe she didn't recognize him because she was looking for the *same* Jesus; the earthly, bodily Jesus; the one who had walked the roads with her and had sat at table with her and had talked with her about so many things. This was the Jesus whom she had known and this was the Jesus she longed for. This was the Jesus she so desperately wanted to embrace again. And then the risen Christ spoke her name, and she knew it was Jesus. Can you imagine that moment? Mary's joy must have been overwhelming. She must have run to him and thrown her arms around him; her tears renewed, but no longer of bitterness.

But then Jesus said, "Do not hold me." And Mary was taken aback. Something was different here.

I have a nephew who, as a child, was so meticulous that he would burst into tears if something got broken even if it wasn't his. Once, after just getting a big ice cream cone, he tilted his hand a little too far and all the ice cream fell off into the dirt. He was inconsolable. My sister offered to buy him another ice cream cone, but this wasn't good enough. He said, "No! I want *this* ice cream cone, but I want it not to be dropped!"

In a way, I believe this is what Mary wanted. She wasn't looking for a resurrected Christ because she didn't *want* a resurrected Christ; she wanted the same earthly Jesus that she knew and loved—and she wanted him never to have been crucified. And so she ran to him to embrace the one who had spoken her name, but he said, "Do not hold me." "Do not hold on to the earthly Jesus you knew."

"Do not hold me," he told her, and there was urgency in his voice. And what had he asked her earlier? "*Who are you looking for?*"

On this Easter Sunday when we go to the tomb with Mary, who are we looking for? Are we looking for the same old familiar and uncomplicated Jesus we knew as children—the one who simply loved us and asked nothing of us? Are we looking for the Jesus who lived 2000 years ago and who remains obediently within the pages of the Bible? Are we looking for the Jesus we know and are comfortable with, and who is comfortable with the way we are living our lives? Are we looking for the Jesus we feel we understand?

Who are we looking for? I'm afraid if we go to the tomb looking for any of these Jesus' we will come away disappointed. Easter Sunday will come and go and all will be the same as it was. But it doesn't have to be that way if we have the courage to meet not our expected Jesus, but the Jesus who is here today; the resurrected Christ who promised to be with us always, to the close of the Age. The Christ who sent God's Spirit to guide us and lead us and encourage us when the path God sends us down seems too difficult to bear.

Recently I was struck by a reading from Isaiah, which, in the eyes of Christianity, foretells the coming of the Messiah. God speaks through the prophet:<sup>2</sup>

My servant shall... be exalted and lifted up... there were many who were *astonished* at him so marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of mortals—so he shall *startle* many nations; kings shall shut their mouths because of him; for that which had not been told them they shall see, and that which they had not heard they shall contemplate.

No wonder Mary did not know him. This resurrected Christ comes with such surprising newness, such transforming demonstrations of a kind of life we knew nothing about. He startles us; he astonishes us; often he even frightens us. And this is true because the truth Jesus brings is not what the world would have us hear. It is a jarring truth that shakes us loose from our foundations.

Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th Century Danish theologian and philosopher, once wrote these thoughts that are reminiscent of Isaiah's words: "If the Christian gospel ever loses its ability to shock us... then it becomes a superficial thing, capable of neither inflicting deep wounds, nor healing them."

If the Easter announcement from the graveyard does not still electrify and amaze us... if the deep truth of this day has become bland and superficial with easy alleluias and discount victory celebrations... if the shocking news of Easter does not still jar and even wound us deeply, then it may have lost its power to heal the deep brokenness of our lives.

Mary met the resurrected Jesus that first Easter morning, and he asked her two questions: He asked, "Who are you looking for?" and he asked, "Why are you weeping?" Then he spoke one word that changed everything: he spoke her name. One word that told her that this unfamiliar spiritual being knew her as intimately as the earthly Jesus, that he loved her, that he would never leave her.

"Why are you weeping?" Jesus asked Mary, for weeping is always a profound investment of one's spirit, but there are different kinds of tears. We may weep in self-pity for the things that we have lost, whether they be our youth, our wealth, or—like Mary—our dreams.

But these are not the tears we shed when we go to the tomb and dare to meet—not our tame expected Jesus—but the Risen Christ. For when we recover from being startled and astonished and shocked at the news that we cannot keep our old relationship with Jesus—that Easter means new life and renewed relationships not only with Jesus but with each other—we find that though we are still weeping, our tears have changed.

And in this new relationship with Christ we may find that now we weep with joy at the beauty of the world God has given us; now we weep with compassion at the suffering of so many; we may find that now we weep out of happiness as with satisfaction we do the work God has given us to help build the Kingdom; or now our tears flow out of gratitude that the God of all creation would choose us and name us as daughters and sons.

Why are you weeping? Maybe we are weeping because finally we understand what it means to be embraced by a God who knows us intimately and, in spite of who we are, loves us enough to go to the Cross. Maybe we are weeping because as we meet this strange and startling Christ who requires a new relationship with him we know as we have never known it before, that Jesus, who was for us dead, is alive again.

Grace, mercy and peace. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 52:13-53:4