

Why are you weeping?

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Easter - April 16, 2006
John 20: 1-18

The Lord is risen,
The Lord is risen indeed.

We gather this morning amidst the flowers and the songs, the smells and bells - pretty soon - to announce once again that life is stronger than death.

The hymns tell us that Jesus "burst his three day prison" - *This Joyful Eastertide*
Yet what if, despite the pageantry, we feel as if we are still caught in the "caverns of despair." - *Christ is risen, Shout hosanna*

It is not an easy Easter we celebrate this year. Last Sunday we heard with poignancy the emotional turmoil of abandonment, as the grave looms ever nearer. Many of us have felt the agony of Passion Week with particular intensity at the death of our dear sister and friend Sally White. Hundreds gathered yesterday in the Quaker tradition for a memorial "meeting for worship" to remember our friend Martha Wenger. We have mourned the death of Tom Fox in Iraq as he served with Christian Peacemaker Teams. We protest ongoing wars around the world. We have been to the tomb.

We know the way to the tomb, we don't need directions, we know it by heart even the first time we go. We go to that place where we have laid our love, where it seems that love will never live again.

And we weep. Sometimes with others. But mostly alone. We are so alone in our grief. There is no way for anyone to take away the pain, no way for the pain to dissipate magically. So we sit and we weep until there are no more tears. And the next day we weep again.

This is Mary's story too.

She comes to the tomb, in the cover of darkness, to care for the body of her teacher, the one who has changed her life. And she comes to weep. It is safer in the dark given the Roman regime that rules so ominously.

When she gets to the tomb her Jesus is gone. The boulder, which had been there in front of the tomb, is moved and his body has disappeared. In fear she runs to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple.

"The Rabbi has been taken from the tomb! We do not know where they have put Jesus."

Peter and the Beloved One are on their feet and out the door almost before she can finish. They race to the tomb, literally. The Beloved One arrives first, looks in to see that the cloth used to wrap Jesus' body is still there, laying on the ground. Peter arrives next. To prove that his devotion is even stronger than the One who outran him - he enters the tomb. He sees not only the cloth on the ground but another cloth rolled up and placed off to the side. Then, as if to continue proving strength of heart and commitment, the Beloved disciple gathers up courage and enters the tomb with Peter. Indeed, it is true. Jesus is gone.

Together, these two understand that the body of Jesus is not there. They return to their homes. This time they are not racing. They walk alone. They grieve but now it is time to get with life. It had been amazing, the experience of traveling and learning with Jesus. But now he is dead, his body is gone. It is time to get back to real life, providing for the family. That glorious chapter of life with Jesus is over. Hanging on to the past will not help to bring him back.

But Mary –

remains at the tomb. She cannot stop weeping. Her tears are endless. The longer she sits by the tomb the less frightened she feels. She looks for herself into the tomb as the others had done before her. She does not see the grave clothes on the ground. She sees -

angels, sitting where Jesus had been laid. Through her tears she sees that she is not alone, there is one at the head and one at the foot where he had been laid. Angels.

They ask, "Why are you weeping?"

Why is she weeping? How could she do anything but weep? She gathers herself to respond, "They have taken my rabbi and I don't know where they have put his body." Her Leader, has been killed and now even his body, all that she has left of him to care for, even that has been stolen. And she turns to weeping once more.

As she turns she sees someone else standing there. She does not know this one either. He also asks, "Why are you weeping?" and then "Who are you looking for?"

Who could this be? The gardener out so early in the morning? While it is still dark?

"Please, if you are the one who carried Jesus away, please tell me where you have put him. I will take him away." With this pledge to remove the body herself, she returns once again to her own thoughts, to weeping.

The man says, "Mary!"

And through her tears Mary turns and sees. She hears the familiar voice calling her name.
"Rabbi! Teacher!"

She instinctively reaches out to him, to greet him but Jesus quickly says,

"Do not hold onto me. I have not yet gone on to be with God. But there is something for you to do. Go and tell the others. Tell the sisters and brothers, that I am going to my God and your God."

Mary takes this task seriously. With joy she goes to tell the others that she has seen Jesus alive and she tells them all that he has said.

Isn't it curious how this woman is the one that spreads the news? That it is she that sees Jesus? All she could do was to weep and then weep some more. Jesus, the one who had changed her life, was dead. Her only response was to sit at the tomb and grieve, heaving great sobs of sorrow. And yet - she is the one who sees Jesus.

The other disciples came to the tomb. They gathered the facts. The tomb was empty. What Mary said was true, no body was in there. And then they went on their way. What more could they do? There was nothing else to be done.

But Mary, who may be afraid of any number of things, is not afraid to cry. She stays with the grief. Perhaps those tears empower her to look for herself into the tomb. Through her tears she sees that she is not alone. There are angels.

She stays long enough with her tears that she is still at the tomb when Jesus appears. The Jewish tradition provides time for mourning, for tears with others. To "sit Shiva" is to sit for seven days in the home of the loved one who has died. People come and sit respectfully to provide support and love while the family grieves. Mary is sitting shiva, not by modern understandings but spending time in grief all the same. It is in this experience of sitting with her grief that Mary meets Jesus again. She receives the new revelation of who Jesus has become. It is not the same as it was, she does not touch him. But his presence is real all the same and he continues to teach her.

On this day when resurrection may seem far away I encourage us not to discount the tears. It is okay to cry, to grieve. Despite the flowers and the beauty of this day resurrection may not feel possible, may not feel true. But through her tears Mary saw Jesus. Through our tears and grief we can encounter the Risen One. As a grieving father told his young son, "We will be sad for a long time but we will not be sad forever." (Konrad Ege to his son Hans)

When we lose someone we love it is easy to give up on love and move toward distrust. It is easy to say "Love is not worth the cost if it causes this much pain."

But as Christians we are called to crawl out of that hole of despair and to reach for love again, not alone but with each other. When I cannot hold the hope of resurrection you hold it for me. When your faith falters we gather just to practice what we say we believe. We bring food, do laundry, light candles, cry and pray for each other and with each other. That is what it means to be part of the family of Christ. We "hold the Christ light for each other in the nighttime of our fear" and grief. (*Will you let me be your servant?*) Holding the light of resurrection we hope and pray that the grieving one will gradually relearn to believe in love. We have to trust that through the tears a glimpse of new life will be revealed.

On this Easter morning,
in a world of war and famine,
in neighborhoods with petty bickering and dangerous violence
we dare to claim again that there is hope.

In a culture that tells us that crying is a sign of weakness and failure,
We claim that owning our weakness is a strength,
In a society that tells us that happiness can be bought if you have enough money,
We announce that true joy is free to those who are not afraid of mysterious revelations.

We claim that Jesus is right here
on the other side of our tears.
ready to meet us, calling out our names.

We proclaim that out of death can come new life,
even through our tears.