

SCRIPTURE TEXT: John 20:1-18

SERMON TITLE: “Why are You Weeping?”

Now I know that Easter Sunday is a time for joy, but to do justice to the text, we need to step back for a moment because the Easter story begins in darkness and in grief, And that’s exactly where some of us may be this morning as we gather for Easter worship. But that’s okay because I don’t think we can truly experience the power of the resurrection unless we acknowledge the reality of death, darkness and grief--so this is where we’ll begin!

Pastor Susan Andrews tells the story about a woman named Lydia. Lydia is a gifted concert pianist, a wife, a mother and a great friend to dozens of people. But on one sunny day in January, Lydia received a phone call that shattered her world. Her two oldest children--a son, Steven, and a daughter, Vivian--had been on a high school ski trip when their bus plunged off a cliff killing both of them instantly. With that phone call, Lydia’s life became an instant hell.

But she got through it. She hung on through the funeral, she disposed of the children’s clothing and belongings, she forced herself to go back to work playing the piano to pay the bills.

Lydia’s friends were pleased that she was “managing” so well. But Lydia had a secret. In the middle of the afternoon--when no one else was around--when the grief was so intense that she could hardly breathe--Lydia would slip quietly into Vivian’s room and crawl into Vivian’s bed. Even though Lydia had given all of Vivian’s clothes away, she had never changed the sheets on Vivian’s bed--and so for her, Vivian was still there. So Lydia would wrap herself in those sheets, close her eyes, open her heart, and it was if Vivian was there.

Author Gail Godwin calls this kind of grief “a living ache.” “[It’s the] ache that you treasure, that unique wrenching ache that you hoard: you go looking for it. You don’t want the ache to go away, because as long as it’s there, so are they. . . . [they] can go on living physically in you, as long as the ache is physically present.”

I think Mary Magdalene knew this “living ache.” After all, her heart was broken as she went to the tomb in the darkness on that first Easter Sunday morning. Jesus, her beloved teacher and friend, was dead. The ache of her loss must have been unbearable.

And yet, there she was at his grave. She must have known that she wouldn't be able to see him or to touch him for the tomb had already sealed shut by the stone. She just wanted to be close to him like Lydia wanted to be close to Vivian as she slipped between those sheets. Mary didn't want to let go--she wanted to hold on to the past--to the way things had been before.

But here's the problem for her and for us: that "living ache" can so mire us in the past that the hurt can never be healed or transformed. The "living ache" then becomes a form of grieving without hope because it resists the power of the resurrection that brings new life out of death.

So what do you think? Did Mary grieve without hope on that first Easter Sunday morning? I think so, because as Mary arrived at the graveyard, she couldn't begin to imagine God's capacity for transcending life's endings. That's why her reaction to the empty tomb was to assume that someone had removed the body, not that God had acted to bring life out of death.

Mary was so distracted by her grief that she didn't even recognize Jesus when he appeared to her. She was so intent on looking for the old that she missed the new; she was so concerned with what she had lost that she failed to recognize what she was being given.

So the risen Christ spoke to her: "Woman, why are you weeping?" Don't you realize that something amazing has happened here that turns weeping into joy! "Whom are you looking for? Well, he's not here! "Mary!" I know your name and you know me.

What's the point? Christ is risen! And through his resurrection, God calls us out of the past and into the future--out of the old and into the new--out of our hopeless grieving and into a joyous life of forward looking expectation!

But we have to let go. The risen Christ said to Mary: "Don't hold on to me." Don't hinder the work of God. Let it unfold and bring new life and joy in its wake! So let go!

One more thing. The risen Christ said to Mary: "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" In other words, go and tell!

Now think about this: For Mary to go and tell, she had to direct her attention toward others--toward the others who were also grieving without hope. As she made this turn, can you imagine how Mary's life must have changed as she became an instrument of hope and life for others? That's not a bad prescription for overcoming grief--which reminds me of a story.

There is a Jewish folktale about a widow whose son died in a tragic accident. The woman mourned her loss so deeply that no one could comfort her. At last, a friend took her to the house of a holy man where she made a sobbing plea: "Use your powers to bring my son back to life. Surely you are able by prayer or some magic to induce the Almighty to lighten my grief!"

The old man spoke kindly to the woman, "Bring me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. I will use that seed to take the pain from your life."

The woman immediately set out in search of the magic mustard seed. She first picked the home of a wealthy family, because she was convinced that they never knew sorrow. But as soon as she spoke to the wealthy wife, she learned differently. With tears and lament, this woman began to pour out the sorrow and tragedies of her life. And the widow listened.

When she left to resume her search, the widow visited a modest home a mile away. The experience was the same. Wherever she traveled, from mansion to hut, she was greeted with tales of sadness and sorrow. Everyone found her a willing and careful listener.

After months of travel she became so involved with the grief and struggles of others that she forgot about her search for the magic mustard seed, never realizing that it had indeed driven the sorrow from her life.

My brothers and sisters, to believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, is to believe in the possibility of new life for ourselves--not just in the sweet-by-and-by, but in the here-and-the-now. So why are we weeping? Why are we grieving without hope? Now is the time for rejoicing! Don't hold on. Let go of the phantoms of the past and lay claim to the possibilities of the future. Go and tell.

After all, what are a few minutes between old bed sheets when compared to a life-giving,

hope-filled relationship with the risen Christ? Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! .