

Who Are You Looking For?

Mary Magdalene heads to the tomb before sunrise. Her Master has suffered a brutal and humiliating death at the hands of the state and she is dragging herself through the valley of the shadow of death. Why has she gone to his tomb? To anoint his corpse with oil. To touch him one last time. Why not go to the tomb? She has been awake for hours and feels compelled to say good-bye one last time.

But when she arrives, the stone is not covering the entrance and a chill runs through her body. Bewildered by what she discovers, she quickly takes off running. She finds Simon Peter and the other disciple and tells them what she has found. They race to the tomb and Mary follows. The two disciples see that the body of Jesus is missing and do not linger. They return to their homes while Mary remains in the garden crying.

Inside the tomb are two angels and they say to Mary, "Why are you weeping?" The gospel writer does not spell out her full response but if you have lost a loved one, you can fill in some of the thoughts spinning in her head and some of the feelings wrenching apart her soul.

Why am I weeping? Because my heart is aching – the one who always knew the right thing to say to lift my spirits is gone?

Why am I weeping? Because I'm confused and disoriented – the one who helped me make sense of things is no more.

Why am I weeping? Because I'm furious! Injustice and cruelty win again and I am sick of it!

Why am I weeping? Because I feel so lonely – the one who made me laugh and think, the one who supported me and gave me confidence, the one who made me want to do the right thing is gone!

Why am I weeping? Because the one who gave me hope that what is ahead will be better than what is, has been snatched away and I doubt that I can go on without him.

It is unclear why the angels asked Mary why she was crying. Maybe Mary looked as if she were about to explode from all the grief raging inside and the angels' questions were an opportunity for Mary to unload her jumble of thoughts and feelings and tears. Thanks be to God the angels did not respond to Mary with pious platitudes.

Maybe you have known someone uncomfortable with death who responded to your grief with words that were not only unhelpful but contradicted every fiber in your body. You are suffering from a loss that strikes to your core and a friend says, "It must be God's will." Inside you scream out, "No!" I do not believe God willed a young mother to die of cancer."

Or a friend says, "I know exactly how you feel." And you want to lash back, "No, you do not know exactly how I feel. You may know how it feels to lose your spouse, but not mine. You do not have the same passionate memories or the same unfinished business. You do not know how I feel."

Thankfully, the angels who spoke to Mary did not try to slip away from her grief by saying something trite. They did not pat her on the shoulder and say in a voice brimming with condescension, "There, there, everything will be just fine."

When Mary was on her way to the tomb before dawn, she assumed she would find the corpse of Jesus wrapped up tightly in burial linens, but his body was missing. After Mary alerted Peter and the other disciple, they raced to the tomb to make sense of what Mary had told them.

Of course, being men, they probably figured she had made a mistake. Maybe in the dark, she had looked in the wrong spot. Maybe she could not bear the hard truth. Can't you just hear Peter saying, "Well, we men will go check it out and explain everything."

But when the two male disciples reached the tomb, it was empty and that zipped their lips like never before.

The resurrection of Jesus is the unexpected jolt that contradicts all expectations. We think we have it all figured out. We know the way things work. Nothing lasts forever. Everything perishes. When you're dead, you're dead. End of story. But the resurrection of Jesus is a divine act of defiance to the power of death.

In our Lenten journey, eight questions have guided us. "Who will you listen to? How do we begin again? Who sinned? Can these bones live? Will you give me a drink? Where are you headed? Will you wash my feet? Why have you forsaken me?"

Today, this Easter morning, they bring us to the culminating question, "Who are you looking for?" All this time, we have been seeking: seeking answers, seeking guidance, seeking Jesus. But the responses we get depend very much on what – or who- we are looking for.

In every question, a picture of Jesus has been forming in your mind. Who is Jesus to you? What is he capable of? What does he want? The way you feel about that determines greatly how you hear his response.

As Mary weeps at the empty tomb, the picture she has formed in her mind is one of tragedy. Jesus has died, and now someone has gone so far as to steal his body. I imagine she thought enemies of Jesus did that, the same ones who wanted to silence his voice and end his movement. This is her cry, even in the face of two mysterious figures robed in white.

And then she turns around. She sees a man standing there. She does not see that it is Jesus. She sees only in her grief, and only through the lens of tragedy. What else could she do?

In the Aramaic translation, Jesus says to her, "Why do you weep? And Who do you want?"

"Who do you want?"

What an interesting question. Of all the versions of Jesus out there, which one do you believe? For which Jesus are you crying? Who do you want?

In her book, *Original Blessing: Putting Sin in its Rightful Place*, Rev. Danielle Shroyer talks about having a conversation she had with a priest who, after learning she didn't believe in original sin, asked her why we need Jesus. She argues that original sin diminishes the fullness of Jesus and the full scope of his ministry. She asserts, "When we emphasize sin as the big problem and we make salvation the debt paid for our sin problem, then Jesus becomes not a savior but a sin portfolio manager. He is relegated from bread of life to debt officer."

Who do you want? Is that all Jesus is to you? A get out of hell free savior? Rev. Shroyer says when you look at Jesus that way we lose the beautiful, wise, faithful life of Jesus.

Think of all the stories we heard about Jesus throughout our Lenten journey. He met with a religious leader who sneaks out at night to ask questions. He leads his disciples through enemy territory and, weary and dehydrated, he breaks all social norms to ask a Samaritan woman for a drink.

He dispels common thinking around sin and disability and gives sight to a man born blind. He is deeply disturbed and troubled by the death of his friend Lazarus. He goes to Jerusalem despite the threats mounting against him. He subverts power dynamics by stooping low to wash his friends' feet. He asks God "Why?" in his last breaths.

And now he appears to Mary in an unexpected way, after death. As you consider who Jesus is, consider that question again. Who are you looking for? Who do you want?

Let's look at our art, entitled, Rabbouni! by T. Denise Anderson. She says this about her art. "In the days immediately after a loved one's passing, we often muddle through life until the closure of the funeral, when it will all – or mostly – be over. What happens when it doesn't appear you'll have that closure anytime soon, or ever? Some of us have experienced delayed burials due to difficult circumstances. The closure the funeral provides helps us begin piecing life together in our loved one's absence. Without that ritual, it's incredibly difficult to move on.

This is the space in which Mary Magdalene finds herself. She arrives at the tomb to provide burial services for her dear teacher, only to find his body is gone. What grief that must have thrown her into, having her last act of love for him arrested like that! There is no reason to expect that the stranger speaking to her is her beloved teacher, and maybe that's why she doesn't recognize him immediately. It's in the intimacy of him calling her name that she realizes what's happening.

Here, the artist says, I attempt to convey the grief, befuddlement, and ultimate realization that I imagine Mary experienced in this encounter. The light source is above her, as Jesus' simple address – "Mary" – invites her to shift from any potential navel-gazing and to pay attention to the heaven-created phenomenon before her. Moreover, Jesus' address to her comes from a deeply intimate place and is the only thing powerful enough to pierce through her grief. She is profoundly seen and known by her teacher. I want us to behold her the way that Jesus might have in that moment.

Who are you looking for and who do you want?

For me, the Jesus I am looking for is the one that was in those stories we went through this lent. The Jesus who listened to questions, the Jesus who crossed the barriers of racism and The Jesus who washed the disciples feet and showed servanthood. The Jesus I am looking for is the one who stood up to the religious leaders of the day and showed how to do church in a new way where everyone is invited and everyone has a voice. The Jesus I am looking for is the one who says, "Jill, it's ok to question me again and again and again. Because I am walking right alongside you. and questions don't scare me. You see, when you're in a relationship with Christ, questions are encouraged. The Jesus I am looking for is the one who gives voice to the voiceless.

What I am not looking for is the Jesus with the American flag wrapped around him and a card carrying member of one political party over the other.

Of all the versions of Jesus out there, which one do you believe? For which Jesus are you crying? Who do you want?

I believe the world heard the glad tidings of Easter because Mary's answer revealed her wholehearted love for Jesus – beyond teacher, beyond healer, beyond savior. For Mary, Jesus truly became fully God and fully human. She loved all of him, because through him she had experienced a love that embraced all of her. This is the wholeness that heals the world and brings us into eternal life.

What would it look like for us to see Jesus as he is? Not merely as we want him to be, or even need him to be, but in the fullness of his glory – fully human and fully God? What would it mean for us to love him with our whole hearts and live for him from that wholeheartedness?

Listen to this poem entitled lost and found, by Rev. Sarah Speed.

Mary wept,
standing at the garden,
soft dirt under her feet,
sun still tucked away,
sleeping under the horizon.

The other disciples left,
but Mary stayed.
Mary wept.
Shoulders shaking,
tears running down her face.
She said, They have taken my Lord away,
and I don't know where they put him.

But here's what Easter taught me:
if you think you've lost God,
if it feels like heaven has slipped through the cracks,
if you feel like the night will never end,
then know, there is no hide – and - seek with the divine
that doesn't end in you being found.

Stay still.
Keep breathing.
God is closer than you think.

While Mary was the first preacher of the Easter Story, I believe Jesus' words to her have a lot to say to us, too. If Jesus were right here today, and asked you, like he asked her and like he asked his first disciples, "Who are you looking for? Who do you want, what would you tell him? What did you expect to see when you walked through these doors this morning.

If you didn't see what you expected, what would you need to hear in order to believe? What Word reminds you of Christ's promise? And when you leave this place, what Word will you carry with you? What word will make you shout, "I have just seen Jesus!"
Who are you going to tell about Jesus. And more importantly, How are people going to know you've just spent time with Jesus? Who do you want? Christ is Risen, He is Risen indeed!
Amen.