

WOMAN, WHY ARE YOU WEEPING?

Isaiah 25. 6-9

Acts 10. 34-43

John 20. 1-18

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

The twentieth chapter of St John's gospel tells the climax of the gospel story in a rather understated way. It begins simply: Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been moved from it. Understandably, she concludes that someone has taken the body of our Lord; and she goes to report this to Peter and to the other disciple, who was probably John.

The two disciples run to the tomb to make a more thorough investigation of the alleged crime scene. Taken together, verses 8 and 9 of this passage indicate that Peter, John and Mary did not yet comprehend that Jesus had been raised from the dead. When the text states that John 'saw and believed', we are to understand that he believed that something was wrong; he believed that something was not right.

What follows is the now-famous scene of Mary Magdalene weeping over this latest indignity that has occurred to a man she loved. Christ asks Mary, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' Our Lord knew better than anyone else the reason for Mary Magdalene's tears; indeed, her tears are representative of the tears of all humanity. When we are faced with death's irretrievable finality, all of us weep; all of us are moved to tears.

But Jesus asks this question not only out of compassion, but for a reason. He asked this question because he wanted Mary to know (as he wants us to know) that Easter happens where death is. Easter happens where death is, because that is the

circumstance where it is needed. Easter gives us the hope of new life in a world full of death and dying.

Once Mary understands that it is Christ who is standing in front of her, she runs to embrace him. She is both astonished and overjoyed; she has her beloved Lord with her once more, and she never wants to lose him again. But Jesus restrains her, saying, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father'. The ascension had to happen, and there would be no holding onto Christ before he went back to his Father.

Before this stage of the Easter drama closes, Mary runs back to the other disciples and becomes the first apostle in the history of the Christian Church. She declares, 'I have seen the Lord!' She saw him, even if she could not hold onto him.

And the good news is this: if you and I have faith, then we have also seen the Lord. The trumpets may not always blare at every moment of our lives as a result. Indeed, we may still be led to shed tears because of difficult circumstances; but Easter will continue to happen in the midst of our tears. Easter will continue to happen, because you and I have discovered a hope. Our hope is that death is not irretrievably final. The joy of our hope is that death is not the end. By faith, we also have seen Jesus. And for now, it is enough. *He is enough.*

I wonder if you have ever heard the true story of Mary Ann Bird. Mary Ann had it rough growing up. Born with a cleft palate and a disfigured face, Mary Ann also had lopsided feet and therefore an ungainly way of walking. Naturally, she was the target of all the school-age cruelty the other children could muster. 'Did you cut your lip?' they would sneer. 'Why do you walk like a duck?' Mary Ann lived in a dark world.

One year, Mary Ann's teacher was Miss Leonard. Miss Leonard was short and round but she shined with kindness. Back in those days teachers were required to administer a kind of homespun hearing test. The teacher would call each student up to her desk, have the student cover first one ear and then the other, and the teacher would whisper something to see if the child could hear. Usually the teacher would say simple things, like 'The sky is blue' or 'You have on new shoes today'. Well, Mary Ann dreaded this test because she was also deaf in one ear; and so this test would be yet another chance for her to be singled out for her deficiencies in life.

On the day of the test when it came time for her turn, Mary Ann waddled and shuffled forward. She covered up her bad ear first and then, as Miss Leonard leaned in close, Mary Ann heard words that would change her life. During Mary Ann's hearing test, Miss Leonard whispered, 'I wish you were my little girl, Mary Ann'.

Through those words and in the midst of her personal darkness, Mary Ann heard the voice of Christ; the voice of love, the voice of grace. And it changed her. Mary Ann grew up to become a teacher herself, and now she shines with kindness and grace for her students. It started when Mary Ann heard our Lord call her name through the voice of a middle-aged teacher. *Mary Ann.*

The twentieth chapter of St John's gospel gives us an Easter that we can take back home with us when we leave church this morning. John 20 gives us good news that we can live by, and also live with. Whatever shadows you and I may face, a truly risen Saviour is waiting to meet us in them. Our risen Saviour is bursting with new life. He is here, and he is here with us now.

And he knows our names, just as surely as he knew Mary Magdalene's name and burst Easter into her heart the moment he called that name to her. *Mary.*

No matter what we may be facing, and even in the midst of difficult circumstances, let us listen for that voice. It is calling our names, and it invites us to start living Jesus's new life right now.

Amen.