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Easter Sermon
04-01-2017
Based on John 20

Mary got up early in the morning, when it was still dark, and walked to the tomb. She had slept the sleep of the grieving the night before, falling asleep for a few minutes, then waking, remembering, crying. Jesus was gone. But he didn't *feel* gone.

In some weird way, the way of grief, the way of sorrow, she felt him, just like you feel a missing arm, gone, but still there. Around the corner in her room, she felt his presence. She jumped up to go tell him a story because she knew it would make him laugh. Cooking dinner, she thought, "I'll add this herb, because he really likes it."

Then she would remember.

She remembered how he carried the cross to Golgotha. She remembered how they put a sign over his head. She remembered how the soldiers cast lots for who would get his seamless tunic. She remembered how Jesus asked John to care for his mother as if she was John's own mother.

Mary had been there. She stood to the side the whole day, watching her friend die. She watched as they took him down from the cross, piercing his side. She had prayed then... "Don't let him feel it. There's too much pain already."

She remembered that he was gone.

But it didn't feel *true* in her bones.

She needed it to *feel* real.

So she got up early on that Sunday morning, and walked to the tomb. She thought that if she could just hold his lifeless body, prepare it for the grave, then she'd be ready to accept that this man, this friend, this person who gave her **her** life back, was gone.

But the stone was rolled away.

Jesus' body was gone.

She had no way to find the relief her grief needed.

Often our grief finds no relief.

In the olden days, i.e., before cell phones, before the mass diaspora that has us all moving to the cities where the jobs are, when we lived in the same town for most of our lives, when we lived next door to our folks, when we knew the name of the postal delivery person (we called him the mail man!), where we had roots, not so much wings, but definitely roots, in those days, we had rituals of grief.

We had funerals that were immediate, and all the casseroles we could eat. We had jello monstrosities with marshmallows and pineapple. We had laid out bodies. We had black clothes—women who lost their husbands would observe a period of mourning, wearing black for a year. There were songs that were sung. Wakes that were had. We had “In the Garden,” where we sang

“And he walks with me and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.”

We had all those things because grief is hard.

And grief should never be done alone.

Now we whisk the body away, burn it for expediency and because of the “ick” factor. We take three days off work for the death of a loved one, and then we go back, acting as if everything is okay. We layer grief atop grief—we grieve the losses in our families, the losses of our friends, but we also grieve the losses in our nation.

The Pulse shooting.
The Mother Emanuel killings.
Sutherland Springs.
Parkland school.
Trayvon Martin.
Alton Brown.
Stephon Clark.

And then we layer that with the ordinary sorrow of our daily lives: money worries, job worries, family worries. Add to it another layer if you are from a marginalized population, we add the near daily misgenderings, the insults, the slights. The worries that come along with having to defend your right to exist.

There’s no way to pay attention to the news today without feeling sadness and grief. There’s no way to see what’s happening in our nation without feeling helpless.

And on this Sunday, we head to the tomb. Hoping to make our loss more real, so that we can have some relief.

But instead, we find an empty tomb. Our hope of relief is smashed, because the tomb is empty.

We have to keep carrying our grief. That’s the message of the empty tomb... God is not there.

Imagine Mary's disappointment. She runs to share that disappointment with Peter and the beloved disciple. She's not walking there, but running. She's not calmly telling the disciples about the empty tomb, but instead she's sobbing, filled with anxiety, "They've taken him away! He's no longer there!"

Everything that she thought she needed was gone.

Peter and the beloved disciple come to the tomb, returning with Mary. They verify what she has told them (isn't that just like a man?). They see the empty tomb, the empty burial clothes, his empty linen wrappings. The text tells us that they returned to their homes.

But not Mary. Poor Mary. She still needed relief. She stood by the tomb weeping.

Mary needed something that only God and community can give... she needed relief from her grief, comfort, she needed someone to *be in it with her*. Someone to understand what the loss of Jesus was to her.

And there it was. No. There THEY were. Two emissaries of God. Angels. They asked, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

She answered, "They have taken away my Mister, and I don't know where they have taken him."

Mary is deep in the abyss of loss. Trying to receive comfort anywhere. Talking to strangers, like telling the cashier at Wal-Mart all your sorrows. Anyone, anyone could help her.

Then a man is standing there. He asks, "Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?" She begs of the man, assuming he is the gardener, "If you know where they've taken him, please tell me."

And then he says her name. Jesus says to her, "Mary."

In the way that only someone who loves you can do. In the way that only someone who knows you nearly better than you know yourself can do. In the way that only someone who has walked with you, talked with you, held your hand, in only that way, Jesus calls Mary's name. "Mary," he says.

And because Mary is KNOWN, she re-members. Someone knows her so well, that just in the inflection of his voice saying her name, she un-breaks. She finds the relief she has sought. Her self becomes knit back together.

Yes, in coming back to life, in being resurrected, in rising from the tomb, Jesus conquered death.

And in a big way, we began to understand that God's love is redeeming and reconciling and rejuvenating.

But in this moment, we see that Jesus coming back to life has a way of healing us of our grief. That knowing Jesus is the way to conquer our sorrow, our grief, our sense of disconnect in our daily life. Jesus saying our name shaves the edges off our layers of grief, and helps us become whole again.

Mary already knew that about Jesus in her life. She had been healed of seven demons. But *this* meeting with Jesus, *this* calling her name in the bleakest moment of her life, *this* put her back together.

What about you? Have you heard your name?

Have you heard, Elizabeth, Harry, Sarah, Paul?

Have you heard Jay, Betty, Lydia, Bob?

Have you heard Skye, Erica, Marcus, Penny?

You might be saying, “I haven’t heard my name, because Jesus isn’t walking the earth today.”

But Jesus is walking the earth in the form of the church. We’re here, to call your name... to help you put your life back together after grief, to re-knit the bones of your life, to call your name.

This is the place where the rituals of life help us deal with the reality of death. This is the place where we hold as holy the daily tasks of life. This is the place where community knits us back together in Jesus’ name. This is the place where living in hopeful community with each other helps us mend our lives, and hopefully the lives of others.

[Move to the Table]

This is the place where our lives are knit back together in Jesus’ name. Where we are known—not just by what we do, as in our ordinary lives—but known because of who we are, how we show up, and how we love one another.

And part of that knitting back together in is this meal. Simple bread, and Baptist wine. The place where we receive just a bit of God’s grace to nourish our bodies, to strengthen our trust in God, and to renew our hope.

We do this meal in remembrance of another meal, when Jesus took the bread and broke it and said, “This is my body. Broken for you. It’s the same body that rose up out of the grave, so that you can hear your name.”

In that same meal, Jesus poured the wine into a cup and passed it around, saying, “This is a new covenant of my blood, poured out for you. It’s the same wine that knits us back together, heals our hurts and helps us to remember who we are and whose we are.”

At Wake Forest Baptist Church, there’s no test to see if you are worthy of the bread and the wine. It’s not a membership question. It’s not a conversion question. And it is certainly not a question of being good enough... At Wake Forest Baptist Church, All are welcome, no exception.

Will you come?