

Glory in the Garden

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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John 20:11-18

There are two levels to this story. On the one hand this is a deeply personal story about what Jesus does in the life of Mary Magdalene, but on the other hand, it's also something more. The commentator Dale Bruner gets at this something more when he says this about Mary Magdalene's grief: "Mary's emotion represents the emotion of the whole world in the presence of death." He suggests that Mary's lament is more than just the mourning of one woman; her tears evoke the emotions of all the people who've stood in a cemetery garden, by the mouth of an open grave and wept as they confronted the power of death.

Bruner's statement reminds me of Jane Kenyon's poem. Jane Kenyon was a Christian believer and a respected poet. She taught in Ann Arbor at the University of Michigan and she died of cancer in 1995 when she was only in her 40's. One of the last poems she ever published took its imagery from our Bible passage. The name of the poem comes from the question Jesus asks Mary in the garden: "Woman, Why Are You Weeping" In the poem Kenyon describes a crisis of questioning and doubt that washed over her during a trip to India in 1991. Kenyon was there working for the state department, but the poverty and the suffering she saw there shook her. The streets are full of broken people, and she can't get used to the extreme poverty and the desperation of the beggars who tug on her skirts or tap on her car window.

Later, on a tour of the Ganges river, she is shocked to see the body of a new born lapping up against the riverbank. The tiny body rises and falls with the garbage in the wake of the boats that go by. She is shaken by the sight, but her guide Rajiv is matter-of-fact. "He explained. When a family is too poor to cremate their dead, they bring the body here, and slip it into the waters of the Ganges and Yamuna Rivers. Perhaps the child was dead at birth; perhaps it had the misfortune to be born a girl. The mother may have walked two days with her baby's body to this place where Gandhi's ashes once struck the waves with a sound like gravel being scuffed over the edge of a bridge. I lose my place. I don't know why I was born, or why I live in a house in New England, or why I am a visitor with heavy luggage giving lectures for the State Department. Why am I not tapping with my fingernail on the rolled-up window of a white government car, a baby in my arms?"

All of this sends her spinning into a cycle of sadness and questions and doubt. She sums up her feelings with Mary's words: "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they've laid him."

Dale Bruner was right: in this passage Mary's grief is not just her own, her grief represents the grief of the whole world in the presence of death. Which means that the gospel presented here is a gospel for the whole world in the presence of death. In the spirit of Bruner's observation, I want to look at this story with you at two levels. I want to look at this story with you first of all from the level of Mary's personal loss, and then I want to look at it from the deeper cosmic level.

On a personal level, it's not so surprising that Mary Magdalene stays at Jesus' graveside longer than everyone else. She just can't bring herself to leave, because her loss is greater than the other disciples. Jesus was all she had in this world. Think about it: what do we know about Mary? We know that she was a woman with a past. We know that she had suffered pain and trauma. Luke tells us that Jesus cast 7 demons out of her. Before she met Jesus, Mary was possessed by 7 demons! What do you think life would have been like for someone possessed by 7 demons? Not good, right? I imagine she lived like a beggar on the streets of Calcutta. People ignored and avoided her. When they did look at her, they saw her with a mixture of fear and disgust. Jesus had saved her from that. Jesus was the first person who'd ever looked at her and loved her. Jesus threw out those demons and loved her with a life-changing love. His love was the only firm footing she'd ever had in her life. And now he was gone.

The other disciples had a life before Jesus. They could go back to their fishing or their tax collecting or whatever they did. What was Mary supposed to do? Go back to the demons?! No wonder she stays in the garden; Jesus was her life. Her grief at this graveside was absolute. "They've taken away my Lord, and I don't know where they have put him."

Jesus comes down into Mary's deep despair and lifts her up to joy. And he does it in a twinkling of an eye. All he does is say her name. In the way John tells the story, it's like he makes her a new creation and he does it in the same way he made the first creation. He does it by speaking her name. That's how the world was created, right? "Let there be light!" says the Lord, and there was light. And that's how Jesus does it in his ministry; he speaks things into being. 'Come out of her,' he says to the demons, and the demons come out. 'Be still,' he says to the waves, and the waves are still. 'Pick up your matt and walk,' he says to the paralytic, and the paralytic gets up and walks. And here Jesus simply says a name. "Mary!" he says, and Mary's life is reconstituted. Her weeping turns into dancing, her fear is turned to joy, her despair is turned to hope. Jesus says 'Mary' and a new Mary comes into being.

I love it that Jesus restores Mary by saying her name. I love the intimacy of that. The picture in John is that he says her name, and she spins around and then she just grabs him and hugs him. How great would it be to hear Jesus say your name? We like it when anyone knows our name. 'Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name and their always glad you came,' says the old song. "Norm!" But how great would it be to hear Jesus say your name! Reading this story, I wonder if that's how it will be for us at our end. At the end of our life we will be lost in weakness, and pain. And we will be wrestling with fears and doubts, maybe like Jane Kenyon we will say to ourselves "They've taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have put him." But then just at the moment we sink all the way down Jesus will say our name, "Peter!" "Tom!" "Susan!" "Brian!" "Mary!" And we shall arise at the sound of our name. In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, our fear will become joy, and we shall be changed.

That's the personal side of this passage and it doesn't get more personal than that. But now let's look at the deeper side of the passage, the cosmic side. Here we will also see something beautiful, but in a different way. For that we need to go back to look at the first two verses of our passage. Mary is weeping as she goes back to the tomb and looks inside. What does she see? "Two angels in white seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot." So you can kind of picture what Mary saw: a raised stone table where Jesus' body had been, with an angel on either end. What does that remind you of? Does that image of a table with angels at either end remind you of anything from the Old Testament? The ark of the covenant. The ark of the covenant was a raised box, the flat top of the box was the atonement cover, and at either end of the box there was cherubim with their wings coming forward over the ark. What Mary saw in the tomb looked a little bit like the ark of the covenant. Commentators have noticed that similarity and wondered about it.

But now let's go deeper. The ark was in the tabernacle. If you know your Tabernacle architecture, you will remember that the ark of the covenant wasn't the only place in the tabernacle where you found the images of cherubim. All the curtains around the tabernacle had images of cherubim woven into them. What other imagery did you see in the tabernacle? There was garden imagery. The lampstand was made to look like a budding flower. The priestly robes had flowers and pomegranates embroidered on them, and later, in the temple, the whole temple had carvings of fruit and plants and open flowers. So there was garden imagery and cherubim.

Why did God command the people to put images of flowers and fruit and cherubim in the tabernacle? He wants them to think of the garden of Eden. The garden of Eden was obviously a place full of flowers and fruit. But remember, after Adam and Even sinned he cast them out of the garden of Eden, and what did God do to prevent people from returning to the garden? He posted two cherubim with flashing swords who guarded the entrance to the place. The tabernacle was meant to evoke the garden of Eden. If you're still not convinced, consider this: where were the cherubim posted to guard the Garden of Eden? At what point of the compass? East. East of Eden. When the tabernacle was set up, guess which direction it always faced? You got it. East. The Eden imagery is everywhere.

So the tabernacle represents the garden of Eden. When the tabernacle worshippers entered the temple they were meant to have the sense that they were re-entering the garden of Eden. The Cherubim are still there, guarding the entrance, but now, by the mercy of God and through the offering of sacrifices, human beings can go past the cherubim and enter the garden. Access is limited. Only the High priest can go all the way into the center of the tabernacle and stand before the ark of the covenant, but still...this is a momentous and merciful change.

But now let's come back to Mary looking into the tomb. Where is she? What kind of place is she in? A garden. And in the middle of that garden she looks into the tomb to see the new ark of the covenant, a new atonement cover with two heavenly beings at either end, a new mercy seat where people can find forgiveness. But now access is not limited! It's a place where all can enter and bow down and find forgiveness and eternal life. In this garden, God is reversing the curse of the first garden. In the Garden of Eden, a woman who used to walk joyfully with her Lord in the cool of the day is cast out because of her sin and feels despair. In our story a woman in despair comes into the garden, comes into the presence of the new mercy seat of God, and at the end of the story she is walking with her Lord in the garden in the cool of the day. That picture of Mary hugging Jesus is a restoration of how it used to be when Adam and Eve walked with their Lord in the garden and knew no shame. You see, this story isn't just a story of a sad woman who got her best friend back, it's the story of the curse of Eden being defeated, of Jesus crushing the serpent's head.

In fact, when you think about this story from the perspective of the tabernacle and the garden of Eden you realize that God doesn't just defeat evil here, he taunts evil. Because God has planted a shrine in the mouth of death. The evil one thought that tomb would be the end of Jesus, that his light had been swallowed up forever. But God has taken the place intended for evil and turned it into his mercy seat. It's the same thing he did with the cross. Because the devil thought the cross was his thing, an instrument of terror, torture and death; those are his things. But in Christ it has become a symbol of sacrificial love and forgiveness and hope that changes the world. Every time we lift up Christ's cross, we plant a shrine in the place of death.

You don't see it right away when you read these verses, but there is so much gospel here. So much hope. This passage proclaims that no matter how far you've sunk down, no matter how chaotic your life has become, God will go down into your misery and he will say your name.

I said that in this text, God turns the tomb into a holy place. God plants a shrine in the place of death. That's a pretty good description of what we do out there in the world. We witness to the risen Jesus, we proclaim his name, we glorify his name by planting shrines in the place of death. When we go to the visitation for our grieving friend and we embrace them and offer them our love and our prayers, we plant a shrine in the mouth of death. If you would come to our foot spa and watch the student nurses from Calvin University cleaning and caring for the dirty feet of some of our neighbors, and then praying for them when the cleaning is done, you would see young women planting a shrine in the mouth of death. If you would have gone to the prison worship services that we did in Ionia prison before Covid, and watched as church members and prisoners prayed together and sang together and laughed together, you would have seen them planting a shrine in the place of death. It's what we do. Or more to the point, it's what God does through us. It's his MO. And it is glorious.

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