

"WHY DO YOU WEEP?"

INTRODUCTION It's interesting to note that in the closing chapters of the Four Gospels, Jesus fares better at the hands of women than He does at the hands of men. Women were last to the cross. They were last at the cross. They were first at the empty tomb.

One of those who distinguished herself at the death and the resurrection of Jesus was Mary of Magdala. Remember her? Early in His ministry, Jesus had cast out seven devils from this woman. And thus delivered from some undisclosed malady of mind or body, Mary devoted her life without remainder to the Master's service. We can understand then why His death should pierce her heart and plunge her into grief.

DEVELOPMENT On the morning of the world's first Easter, Mary went to the place where Jesus had been buried late on Friday night - out of respect and love. The words that tell of her experience will be read in thousands of Churches around the world this day. They begin,

"Now on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb".

What followed is now a matter of public domain. She ran to alert Peter and John. Those two men hastened to investigate for themselves, and then returned to their homes. As for Mary, she went back to the garden, stood near the tomb and wept.

Presently Jesus appeared in a form that she did not recognize. "Why do you weep?" He asked. "Whom do you seek?"

At this point, we are ushered into a recognition scene - unsurpassed in its feeling and tenderness.

"Supposing Him to be the gardener, she said to Him, 'Sir, if you have carried Him away, tell me where you have laid Him, and I will take Him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary'. She turned and said to Him, 'Rabboni'".

WHY DO YOU WEEP "Why do you weep?" The question may seem to some unnecessary. Perhaps impertinent. Out of place. Even a little cruel.

Yet, we know now the wisdom of encouraging one another to verbalize our emotions. There is therapy here. Why are you happy? Why are you aggrry? Why are you worried? Why do you weep?

It's possible to be over-worried about the wrong things. I heard this week about a man who is determined to worry only one day a week. For some reason, he has chosen to worry on Wednesdays. Rather than spoil all the other days with intermittent worries, he is concentrating all of his anxieties on that one day. He reported that many of the things which he might have worried about vanished from his mind by Wednesday.

It's sometimes the case with grief that self-pity plays too dominant a role. Are you sad for yourself, Mary? Sad for the world? Sad for me? Why do you weep?

EARLY / GARDEN to me to note..
It's significant that Mary wept early in the morning and in a garden. It was a calming time of day, and the place was such as to set the heart at ease. But....Mary could not find peace.

I'm a morning person myself and can only say that Mary's grief must have been enormous if she could weep even as the sun was coming up.

New York City never looks lovelier to me than it does early in the day. There's a sense of cleanliness and freshness and newness to everything that one sees. It's one thing to go to bed at night sick and broken-hearted, but to rise in the morning in that state is deeply serious.

Mary not only had the morning, but she also had a garden. Yes, the dew was still on the roses. Birds filled with song the air. Yet, her grief was not eased or lifted in any way. A woman once sat down to pay tribute to the gardens of the world in these words,

"The kiss of the sun for pardon,
The song of the birds for mirth.
One is nearer God's heart in a garden
Than anywhere else on earth."

We dare not burden nature so, or overly romanticize the out-of-doors. For neither the springtime nor the morning nor the garden could minister to this woman's sorrow.

How distressing it is that the miracle of Easter is sometimes confused with the agricultural miracle of Spring. A youngster last year attended a sunrise service somewhere in Westchester County. A Times reporter asked him what Easter meant to him. The teenager replied, "I think of Easter as the renewal of Spring....I'm so glad it comes at the right time of the year." I think we're on the wrong track with that kind of thinking. We need to remember that Easter in the Southern Hemisphere comes at a different time of year. The rites of Spring do not give meaning to the resurrection of Jesus. It is the resurrection of Jesus that gives new meaning to the rites of Spring!

WHY DO YOU WEEP "Why do you weep?" Mary wept because her world had come to an end. O, her necessities would be cared for. No problem there. And some of the amenities of life would be provided for, too. She would go on existing. That wasn't the point.

I think what Mary needed, and what every human being needs, is a sense of significance. A sense that one's life means something -- that it's going somewhere -- that it has value. Erich Frank, a contemporary philosopher, put it this way,

"Man's whole life is a struggle to gain existence,
an effort to achieve substantially, so that he may
not have lived in vain and vanished like a shadow".

Thus, we find it necessary to give ourselves to some pursuit. For some, it may be a pursuit of pleasure. I'm significant because I consume. Somewhere in my travels I picked up a matchbook that proudly bears on its cover these words, "Eat and Drink With Us to the Last Hurrah". Pleasure trips when unconnected to a higher vision are like nothing so much as riding a carousel in a graveyard!

Sometimes in quest of significance we like to tinker with history and imagine ourselves having an effect on world events, "as though society were intended for nothing else but to be mended". And so we work hard to get one set of rascals out and another set of rascals in. I'm significant because I'm busy. I'm moving. I'm in motion. I'm on the run. But, if there is no grand design somewhere, how do we know that we do not spend our energy in vain?

As Americans, our most persistent pursuit is the pursuit of wealth. I am significant. Look what I have acquired. Judge me by my acquisitions, for my acquisitions are an extension of myself. No one in recent years embodied this misguided passion more tragically than the late Howard Hughes. The worth of his material wealth may never be fully and finally determined. Max Lerner wrote a prophetic comment on this mysterious recluse in the Post at the time of his death.

"If so much of what Americans value can end with a naked man, helpless on a stretcher, broken out in sores, covered with a yellow sheet - owning everything, enjoying nothing, using everyone, loved by and loving no one -- what then endures?"

BACK TO MARY Back to Mary of Magdala. Mary had found her significance in Jesus of Nazareth. And now that He was gone her world had come apart. She had made a total investment of her life in Him and that investment had been wiped out. She may have longed for death herself. Tolstoy knew a similar mood. In his Confessions, He wrote:

"I felt that something had broken within me on which my life had always rested, and that I had nothing left to hold on to, that morally my life had stopped."

Then, to her everlasting joy, she made the discovery that we celebrate today! It is all gathered up for us in the touching exchange of two proper names, "Mary". "Rabboni".

Jesus lives. Jesus has a future. It was not all over. It was Caesar's world that was dead, under judgement. Not the world of the crucified, Risen Christ. Mary's sense of significance was reborn; her relationship to Christ was restored.

For her as a person it meant a life of constant growth and new adventure. She was to learn a new way of relating to Him. She was to learn a new title for Him - no longer "teacher", but "Lord". And she would spend a lifetime discovering and living the implications of that title, "Lord".

Her discovery that Jesus was alive not only affected her personal living, it also connected her with cosmic history.

How lamentable it is that the resurrection to many simply has to do with an individual's hope beyond the grave. Let it be remembered this hour that the first Christians believed that what Jesus achieved in His death and resurrection had meaning for all of life - principalities and powers, thrones and dominions. There is a world that does not end. There is a kingdom that is irresistible, from which all of our little lesser worlds derive their meaning. The values embodied in His life - truth, goodness, beauty, kindness, forgiveness - all live! faith, hope, love...

WHY DO YOU WEEP? "Why do you weep?" Mary had the morning. Mary had the garden. Mary had the Springtime. Still she wept. She even had the empty tomb. She saw the stone rolled away and ran to tell Peter and John, returned to the garden and stood outside the tomb and wept.

It wasn't until Mary heard her name pronounced in love by Jesus that her grief dissolved and her joy returned. She heard Him speak her name in love. That could happen to some present here this hour. Pray God it will. Your name spoken by Him in love.

CLOSING Arnold Toynbee directed his trained and able mind on history. Towards the end of his lifetime study, Toynbee gave us a survey of the saviors of the world. He writes,

"When we set out on this quest we found ourselves moving in the midst of a mighty host, but, as we have pressed forward, the marchers, company by company, have fallen out of the race. The first to fall were the swordsmen, the next the archaists and futurists, the next the philosophers, until only gods were left in the running.

At the final ordeal of death, few, even of these would-be-savior-gods, have dared to put their title to the test by plunging into the icy river. And now, as we stand and gaze with our eyes fixed up the farther shore, a single figure rises from the flood and straightway fills the whole horizon with light.

There is the Savior, Christ, 'and the pleasure of the Lord shall prosper in His hand; He shall see the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied".

PRAYER Bless us, O God, this day with the gift of great faith, that seeing, we may see, and hearing, we may hear. Let the Gospel of the Risen Lord in all of its unbounded power and glory, make each of us strong for life and strong for death. For in Him we see life's highest hopes. In Him, we experience life's deepest meaning. Take our natural impulses and stretch them. Confirm them and reassure them on this day of resurrection. We ask these things in the name of the Risen Christ. Amen