

Why Are You Weeping, What Are You Looking For? (Easter)

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[0 : 00] Turn with me in your Bibles to John chapter 20. If you are looking in one of the Pew Bibles, it's page 906. We will be reading John chapter 20, verses 1 through 18.

This is one of the gospel narratives of the resurrection of Jesus. John chapter 20.

I'll be reading beginning at verse 1. 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.

So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him. So Peter went out with the other disciple, and they were going toward the tomb.

Both of them were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first, and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came following him, and he went into the tomb.

[1 : 15] He saw the linen cloths lying there, and the face cloth which had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple who had reached the tomb also went in, and he saw and believed.

For as yet they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

And as she wept, she stooped to look into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet. They said to her, woman, why are you weeping?

She said to them, they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him. Having said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking? 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.

[2 : 26] Jesus said to her, Mary. She turned and said to him in Aramaic, Rabboni, which means teacher.

Jesus said to her, do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, I have seen the Lord, and that he had said these things to her. Well, some of you may know that this spring, Professor Lori Santos is teaching the most popular class ever in Yale College, Psychology and the Good Life.

Nearly a quarter of undergraduates, about 1,200 students are enrolled. Even if you don't go to Yale, you can check out her course online through Coursera. One of her stated motivations for teaching the course was that undergraduate students are way more unhappy, stressed out, and worried about the future than people often realize.

So she wrote in her syllabus, the goal, the main goal of this course is to learn the science of happiness and to put that science into practice. Many things that we think matter for our happiness, wealth, material possessions, even good grades, simply don't.

[3 : 55] Our minds have dumb features that lead us astray, psychological biases that make us seek out the wrong sorts of things. So the course surveys psychology research about what we really should strive for to live a satisfying life.

But it's not only elite college students who are increasingly depressed or discontent and driven. Andrew Sullivan wrote recently in New York Magazine, more than two million Americans are now hooked on some kind of opioid.

And drug overdoses claimed more American lives last year than were lost in the entire Vietnam War. We use an estimated 30 times more opioids than is medically necessary for a population our size.

And he goes on and he says, most of the ways that we come to terms with this, by blaming pharmaceutical companies or blaming doctors or political leaders or drug policies or economic stress, miss a deeper story.

It is a story of pain and the search for an end to it. Even as we near peak employment and record high median household income, a sense of permanent economic insecurity and spiritual emptiness has become widespread.

[5 : 10] He writes, addiction to work, to food, to phones, to TV, to video games, to porn, to news, and to drugs is all around us.

Opioids are just one of the ways Americans are trying to cope with a world where everything is flat, where communication is virtual, and where those core elements of human happiness, faith, family, community, seem to elude so many.

Many years ago, after winning his second straight Super Bowl, the Dallas Cowboys quarterback, Troy Aikman, said, I'll never forget when I was 12, I couldn't wait till the day I turned 16 and I could drive.

I thought that would be the end of all life's problems. And then I turned 16 and realized there were still problems. I kind of said the same thing after I won my first Super Bowl. You think once you win it, all your problems are solved professionally.

But I've won two now, and it hasn't solved a thing. Not a thing. Not a thing. What about you? Do any of those descriptions resonate?

[6 : 32] The more I have, the more I need to have. The more I am loved, the more I need to be loved. The more I achieve, the more I need to achieve. Don't we feel this restless longing, this intense craving, this... And sometimes we deny it.

And sometimes we dull it. And sometimes we taste something that satisfies it for a while. And yet it still comes back and haunts us. In the passage we read from John's gospel, Jesus asks two questions.

Simple and straightforward, but at the same time profound and probing. He says, why are you weeping? And what are you seeking?

Why are you stressed, anxious, grieving, desperate, dissatisfied with life and longing for more? Why are you weeping? Why are you searching? Why are you searching for? Why are you searching for?

And what drives you? What drives you to get out of bed in the morning and do what you do all day and come back where you live at night and do it all over again? What or who are you searching for?

[7 : 38] Now, Jesus doesn't ask these questions in a vacuum. So I want to begin this morning by looking at these questions in the context of his conversation with Mary Magdalene.

And then I want to move ahead to asking, what do these questions have to say to us? So first, this morning I want to look at Jesus' questions for Mary.

Now, a little background on Mary. This is not Jesus' mother, Mary. There are at least three, maybe four Marys who are mentioned in the gospels. It was at least as common a name back then as it was in my extended Italian family.

This is Mary Magdalene, which simply means that she was from a town called Magdala. Mary Magdalene had been a devoted follower of Jesus for some time. According to Luke chapter 8, verses 1 to 3, she belonged to a group of women who followed Jesus when he was traveling and teaching.

And many of these women were well-to-do and provided for Jesus and his disciples and some of his other disciples out of their own means. And for Mary in particular, Jesus wasn't just a famous person, a well-known teacher that she admired from far off.

[8 : 59] Luke chapter 8, verse 2 says that Jesus had healed many of evil spirits and infirmities. And for Mary Magdalene, he mentions that seven demons had gone out of her.

Now, we aren't told any more details. Perhaps she had been plagued by a complex illness. Perhaps her life had been characterized by addictive and self-destructive patterns.

Perhaps she was literally possessed by multiple evil spirits. Perhaps all of the above. But whatever her background, through encountering Jesus, she had been released from bondage and she had found wholeness and joy.

And so, she had joined this group of Jesus' women followers who followed him all the way to the cross. And even when nearly all of his male disciples deserted him, this group of women remained near him.

Even while he was crucified, they saw him take his last breath. They saw where his body was buried. They were loyal to the end. And they were also the first ones to witness his resurrection.

[10 : 03] Verse 1, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb early. While it was still dark, she saw the stone had been taken away. And the other gospels make it clear that she was visiting the tomb in order to anoint Jesus' body with spices.

It was a way of embalming, sort of paying her respects. And that's why she became so distraught after she found that his body was gone.

Now, as a side note, the fact that women feature so prominently in all of the resurrection accounts, in all four of the New Testament gospels, is a testimony to the historical authenticity of these accounts.

Here, Mary is the first one who sees the stone is taken away from the tomb. Matthew, Mark, and Luke tell us that there were two or three other women who accompanied her. Here we see that Mary was the first one who encountered Jesus personally.

And she initially delivered the news to the male disciples that he was alive again. Now, we might not notice that detail. But in the context of the ancient world, that's a very unusual detail.

[11 : 10] Because in the culture of Jesus' time, women were seen as inferior and untrustworthy. So, the Jewish historian Josephus wrote, Women are inferior to men in every way.

Period. Most Jewish rabbis refused to even teach women. Jesus was a notable exception in this regard. He had his 12 male disciples, but again, he also had many women followers.

One other rabbi, Eliezer, said, There is no wisdom in women except with the spindle. In other words, the only thing a woman is good for is making clothes. And in both Jewish and Roman law courts, women were not allowed to be legal witnesses.

So, if you were a male in the ancient world, and if you were writing a narrative to convince people to believe in your Messiah, which is exactly what John says the purpose of his book is at the end of chapter 20, you would never put forth women as your primary witnesses in that cultural context.

If you were playing fast and loose with the details, if you were making up a story, if you were inventing a legend, you would never say that. Because you would be laughed off.

[12 : 29] The only reason you would say it is if it really happened. This is not the kind of story that someone would simply invent.

So, let me challenge you. If you're not a Christian believer, you can't simply assume that the accounts of Jesus' resurrection are legendary fictions with no historical basis, or mere projections of Jesus' disciples' wishful thinking.

Now, if you notice, no one in the story hears about the empty tomb, or sees the risen Jesus, and immediately says, Aha! That's what we were expecting all along.

Our dreams have come true. No! They're all as skeptical as we would rightly be of such a claim. They're confused.

They have to be convinced. None of them were expecting it. Now, maybe you have historical questions or philosophical questions.

[13 : 32] Could this ever really happen? Is there reason to believe it's true? Invite you to stay for the class that's happening downstairs at 1115.

Peter Almo will be addressing those questions after the coffee time in more detail. Or take one of the books from the free book table. We have plenty of books addressing all kinds of questions about Christianity.

We'd love for you to take one home with you as our gift to you today. But let's get back to Mary in the story, and to Jesus' questions for her. Mary, one of Jesus' loyal followers, had come to the tomb early.

She saw the stone rolled away. Her initial conclusion was, they've taken the Lord out of the tomb. We don't know where they have laid Him. They've moved His body. She doesn't say who they are.

They've done it. Somebody did it. So she finds Peter and John. They check it out. They see the burial cloths neatly folded up, which would not have been the case if someone had stolen the body.

[14 : 29] The body was wrapped in the cloths. They also see the face cloth laying there. So they believed, but they didn't fully understand.

And perhaps, as it was very early in the morning, they went back home, and perhaps they went to sleep. As many of us would, if we were rudely awakened in the middle of the night with a disturbing report, and we see something, and we can't quite put it all back together in our heads, and so we go back home.

But Mary stays there, weeping by the tomb. And she turns around, verse 14, she sees Jesus standing, but she doesn't immediately recognize Him, and He says, Woman, why are you weeping?

What are you seeking? Now notice that Jesus didn't have to approach Mary this way. I mean, couldn't He have just simply walked up to her and said, Mary, it's me.

I'm alive. Don't you see? I'm right here. But He intentionally began the conversation with these two questions.

[15 : 40] You know, I think we often underestimate the power of asking simple but probing questions. If you lead a Bible study, or if you teach a discussion section, this is one of your most important jobs.

And it's harder than it seems. Your job is not just to make well-argued statements, but to ask simple but probing questions that help your group dig into the text and dig into their own lives and connect the text to their lives.

If you look through the New Testament Gospels, Jesus often does this. He often asks questions that are simple and direct, yet also probing and profound.

Here are a few examples of questions Jesus asks. What do you want me to do for you? Who do you say that I am?

Why are you so afraid? Do you love me? What are you looking for? Jesus asked this question not only to Mary, but two other times in the Gospel of John.

[16 : 50] In John chapter 5, Jesus approaches a paralyzed man. And he says, Do you want to be healed? Now on the surface, the answer to such a question is painfully obvious.

Do I want to be healed? Of course! Of course he would want to be healed. Or is it always so obvious? I was reading an article recently by a man who had been diagnosed with depression.

And in the course of therapy, he wrestled with this question. Did I really want to get well? Was I willing to do the hard work of facing painful situations, uncovering bitterness, and admitting to deep, resentful anger?

Was I willing to give up my stubborn excuses that allowed me to stay the same, somehow seeing my sickness as more secure than my health? Some of these questions, the answer seems obvious, but when you probe a little deeper, the answer isn't quite so obvious.

And Jesus often used probing questions to expose our unstated assumptions and our hidden motives and bring those out.

[18 : 09] And you know, it's not just in the life of Jesus that we see the power of probing questions. If you go back to the beginning of the Bible to the book of Genesis, when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree that God had reserved only for Himself, and the harmony of creation was disrupted, and the trust of their intimate marriage was broken, and they had transgressed God's command, and they had betrayed His friendship, and God pursued them with simple but probing questions.

He said, where are you, Adam? Eve, what is it that you have done? And in Genesis, God's probing questions exposed their guilt and their feeble attempts at covering it up.

They were hiding in the trees because they had spoiled the garden. They had participated effectively in a plot to displace the owner, and therefore they were no longer fit to be managers.

They were exiled to live the rest of their lives as wanderers. Of course, the point of the story in Genesis is that we all live in its aftermath.

Has not the rest of human history been marked by a lingering unease, by a sense of shame, a sense that all is not right between us and the universe and its maker?

[19 : 45] Is not much of our life a restless wandering a persistent longing, a frustrated but unending search to find that paradise lost? But isn't it interesting that here in another garden we see the risen Jesus approaching Mary with two questions.

And it's not where are you and what have you done? It's not questions that expose her own guilt and shame. It's questions that are inviting.

Questions that draw her out and invite her to respond. Why are you weeping? What are you seeking? And like many of us, Mary thinks that the answers to these questions are very obvious.

Why am I weeping? Because my teacher just died and now his grave has been violated and his body taken away by who knows who. Besides, she might have wondered, why are you asking me the exact same question that the angel just asked me in verse 13?

Didn't you hear my answer? And what am I looking for? I'm looking for Jesus' body to give it a proper and dignified burial. And then Jesus says, Mary.

[21 : 07] And her weeping turns to joy and amazement because the man standing before her is not an unfamiliar gardener.

He's her very own dear teacher. He's the good shepherd who has called her by name. And her search has ended in finding.

not the dead body of Jesus but Jesus alive in his resurrected body. And so Mary embraces Jesus and she wants to hold on to him and never let him go.

That's why Jesus has to say, don't cling to me. He's not saying don't touch me. He's saying you can't hold on to me physically and never, ever, ever let me go.

No. For days and days and years, right? You see, the questions with which Jesus approaches Mary are only the beginning.

[22 : 13] And she walks away with the assurance of a risen Savior with the promise of a new beginning and with a mission to carry out. But what about us? What do these questions have to say to us?

over 300 years ago, Blaise Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher, wrote this.

He said, all people seek happiness. There are no exceptions. However different the means they may employ, they all strive towards this goal.

The reason why some go to war and some do not is the same desire in both but interpreted two different ways. this is the motive of every act of every person, including those who hang themselves.

But Pascal went on to say that though we all seek happiness, very few of us ever actually obtain it in any lasting way. Because he also points out all people complain.

[23 : 21] Princes, subjects, nobles, commoners, old, young, strong, weak, learned, ignorant, healthy, sick, in every country at every time of all ages and all conditions. This really ought to convince us that we are incapable of attaining the good by our own efforts.

The present never satisfies us but experience deceives us and leads us on from one misfortune to another until death comes as the ultimate and eternal climax.

Pascal says, what else does this craving for happiness and this helplessness to obtain it, what else does it tell us but that there once was in man a true happiness of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace.

This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are though none can help since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and unchangeable object in other words by God himself.

Pascal says, we're all seeking for happiness and yet the only place we can truly find it is in an infinite God. Now, there are at least three ways that you might respond to that statement.

[24 : 48] You know, some of you may be saying you've been talking all this time about longing and yearning and an infinite abyss and I just don't feel it.

I know some people do but I'm not weeping and I'm not seeking. Most days I just try to accept life as it comes, practice gratitude and mindfulness and I don't really feel any need for God.

Maybe that's you. I think we can all agree that there is something good about practicing gratitude and mindfulness, being content with our material possessions rather than always longing for more.

But let me ask, if you don't feel any need for God, if you are not weeping over the pain and injustice of this world, if you're not searching for something that this world can't provide, how much have you really suffered?

Have you stood at the grave of a dear friend who lost his life at a young age in an unjust attack and wondered, can there ever be any healing or justice?

[26 : 11] that was exactly Mary Magdalene's situation. My wife and I have been married for almost 10 years now.

The first year we were married, we attended 10 weddings. These days, I find that I attend roughly the same number of weddings as funerals.

As you get older, the proportions only shift one way. And then you see that not all the weddings end in happily ever after. And not all the funerals are people who have lived full lives and died in peace surrounded by loved ones.

There's a lot of brokenness in the world that no justice system will ever fix. Maybe you haven't suffered much yourself.

But through your circumstances, your life has become intertwined with people who have. That was Francis Collins' experience.

[27 : 17] He grew up in a well-educated, non-religious, well-adjusted, happy household. He studied physical chemistry here at Yale.

He went to UNC for medical school. He would later become the director of the Human Genome Project. He's now the director of the National Institutes of Health. He's a very successful young man.

He felt no need for God. In his mind, religion was sentimentality and superstition. And then he came to his third year of medical school and started his rotations in the hospital.

And he noticed that many of his patients with untreatable illnesses found peace through their faith in God. And he started to wonder if faith was just a psychological crutch, it must be very powerful.

And if it was nothing more than a cultural tradition, why were these people not shaking their fist at God and demanding that their friends and family stop all this talk of a loving, benevolent, supernatural power?

[28 : 21] And then one day, one of his patients asked him a simple but probing question. She was an older woman. She was suffering from severe, untreatable angina.

She was a strong Christian believer. She had expressed her faith to him. But that day, she asked him a question. She said, Doctor, what do you believe?

And he stammered, I'm not really sure. And he said, that moment, that question haunted me for several days. Didn't I consider myself a scientist?

Does a scientist draw conclusions without considering the data? Could there be a more important question in all of human existence than, is there a God? And yet, there I found myself having avoided any serious consideration that God might be a real possibility.

This simple but probing question from a dying patient set him on a journey. And eventually, that journey led him to faith in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 34] So he tells some of that story in his book about science and faith, *The Language of God*. There are plenty of copies on the book table if you're interested in his story. So that's the first way that you might respond.

But the second way you might respond is you might say, I know exactly what you're talking about. I look into that infinite abyss every single day.

Some days, I can't even get myself out of bed in the morning because I know exactly what you're talking about. Maybe your life is a constant quest to fill it one way or another.

Or maybe you've given up on ever finding it. And you've resigned yourself to living the U2 song. I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

But if that's you, the same Jesus who searched out Mary Magdalene is searching you out today. C.S. Lewis wrote, *Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for desires exists*.

[30 : 47] A baby feels hunger? Well, there is such a thing as food. A duckling wants to swim? Well, there is such a thing as water. People feel sexual desire? Well, there is such a thing as sex.

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.

If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing.

Why are you weeping? Why are you seeking? You see, the message of Easter Sunday is that the one whom we were made for, the one to whom all our truest longings and all creation ultimately points, has come to meet us.

The Son of God became a human being. He entered into our twisted and broken world. And in His death, He entered into that infinite abyss.

[31 : 58] The chasm separating humanity and God. And His resurrection proclaims that He has bridged that chasm.

That He has bridged the chasm between sinful, rebellious humanity and a perfect and holy God. And yet, in His resurrection, He says He has triumphed over that.

He has bridged that chasm through. Jesus, we can draw near to God with confidence because the curse of sin is broken and the power of death is defeated and the Son of God is risen and a new day has dawned.

in Jesus Christ, there is a joy that embraces us in our weeping and there is a peace that transcends our understanding because like Mary, we can have the assurance that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is now our God and our Father.

That's what Jesus says in verse 17. I'm ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. What that means is that through faith in Jesus, we can be restored to a right relationship with God.

[33 : 12] We can know that our status before God is now secure. We don't have to keep running on the performance treadmill and always trying to achieve the next thing because we are God's beloved children and there's nothing more important in the universe than that.

And He has promised to be with us our whole life through and He has promised that we will be with Him for all eternity to come. So will you turn to Jesus and trust Him today as your teacher, as your Lord, as your Savior?

Third and finally, for those of us who have come to trust in Jesus as our Savior and Lord. You know, if you've been following Jesus for any length of time, you know that being a Christian does not completely remove that unfulfilled longing and that gnawing ache.

Jesus said to Mary, don't cling to me. You can't hold on to my resurrected body forever. And in the same way, being a Christian is not a never-ending series of ecstatic experiences and rapturous joys.

You see, we have tasted and seen that Jesus is good. And we know His joy and peace through the power of His Spirit, but we don't yet see Him face to face. And that's what we're waiting and longing for, the day when we will.

[34 : 51] We've been washed and cleansed and forgiven of our sins. God has promised that He has taken them away. But we're still waiting, we're hoping, we're longing for the full redemption of our bodies. But today on Easter Sunday, if you know Jesus as your Savior, you can be reminded that the object of all our longing and hoping and waiting has found us.

That the Good Shepherd has called us by name and even through the darkest valleys, He continues to lead us and feed us and care for us. And one day, He will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

And in the meantime, as we await that great day, which will be even more glorious than the first Resurrection Sunday, we have a mission to carry out, to proclaim with our words and to demonstrate with our lives in the midst of a hardened and cynical world that the Savior has risen and reigning and He is soon returning.

And sometimes this mission is hard because we battle our own fears, we battle our own doubts, we battle our own cravings for lesser things that threaten to take us over and turn us aside.

But brothers and sisters in Christ, on Easter Sunday, be encouraged. Be joyful in hope. Be patient in affliction. Be faithful in prayer because Christ has risen.

[36 : 08] Indeed, He has risen. Why are you weeping? What are you seeking? Christ is risen. Amen. Let's pray.

O God, who by the glorious resurrection of your Son, Jesus Christ, destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light, grant that we who have been raised with Him may abide in His presence and rejoice in the hope of eternal glory.

Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, to whom with you and the Holy Spirit be dominion and praise both now and forever. Amen. Well, we're going to close by singing Crown Him With Many Crowns, proclaiming the greatness and the reign of Jesus Christ.

Thank you.