

John 20:11 - 16

¹¹but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb ¹²and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

¹³They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." ¹⁴At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

¹⁵"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

¹⁶Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (This means Teacher).

THIS IS THE WORD OF GOD AND IT CAN BE TRUSTED

THANKS BE TO GOD!

LET US PRAY

During the Thirty Years' War in the 17th century, German pastor Paul Gerhardt and his family were forced to flee from their home. One night as they stayed in a small village inn, homeless and afraid, his wife broke down and cried openly in despair. To comfort her, Gerhardt reminded her of Scripture promises about God's provision and keeping. Then, going out to the garden to be alone, he too broke down and wept. He felt he had come to his darkest hour.

Soon afterward, Gerhardt felt the burden lifted and sensed a renewal of the Lord's presence with him. Taking his pen, he wrote a hymn that has brought comfort to many. "Give to the winds thy fears; hope, and be undismayed; God hears thy sighs and counts thy tears; God shall lift up thy head. Through waves and clouds and storms He gently clears the way. Wait thou His time, so shall the night soon end in joyous day."

It is often in our darkest times that God makes His presence known most clearly. He uses our sufferings and troubles to show us that He is our only source of strength. And when we see this truth, like Pastor Gerhardt, we receive new hope. Many here

today have experienced and may be experiencing great trials of their own. Take heart. Put yourself in God's hands. Wait for His timing. He will give you a "song in the night."

Today's scripture reading finds Mary Magdalene and the Disciples of Christ facing their own time of great trial. Though Mary's encounter with the risen Christ is a warm, beautiful and touching account of what happened on that first Easter morning we read that prior to her encounter she had felt panic, increased pain and heartache at the prospect that her Jesus had been taken from the tomb. She had returned to the disciples and brought back Peter and John to the burial chamber which they too found empty. She had sought comfort, answers and explanation from them, but they had none to provide. In their heartache and despair they had left Mary alone.

In our own lives we have found ourselves turning to the world; turning to those we have loved and trusted only to find that they could not (and in some cases would not) provide us with the comfort and the answers that we needed. Like Mary, Peter and John; we find ourselves forgetting the promises of

Christ, the promises to provide for us, to nurture us and to love us unconditionally. Even at the sight of the empty tomb, the disciples and Mary still did not understand what Jesus had taught them concerning His Resurrection. Mary was all alone, so she thought, and then appeared a stranger, whom she first thought to be the gardener. The sudden recognition of her Lord as he spoke her name in the garden gave her new hope for new life--for a new beginning.

That first Easter caused the followers of Jesus to rethink all their commonly held concepts about what life was all about. New hope and new life were the results of Christ's resurrection. Their shattered dreams became a chance for a fresh start; a new day, new hope, and new beginning.

The empty tomb was but *one* image and symbol; powerful though it may have been. More important than the empty tomb, more important than Christ's death was the presence of their Lord in their lives. During the Easter season we spend a lot of time speaking about the death of Christ; the brutality of His crucifixion, the suffering he endured and the moment on the

cross when His own Father turned away from Him. (My God, My God, why have you forsaken me . . .?) While the account of Christ's death is vital in the understanding of His promised fulfillment of the law, it is not where the story ends. It is just the beginning.

In His death, Jesus time on Earth was at an end. His suffering was over and he no longer had any ties to His human state. For some, Christ's death on the cross was the climax to His purpose and His ministry. For others, however, (and I encourage you today to consider being one of these others) it was His Resurrection that was the pinnacle of Jesus purpose and fulfillment of the law. Jesus had not left them as they had thought. Death had not stolen Him away and here he stood before her and would later stand before His disciples. They would be reminded of the way he touched them and would stir their memories. He provided them with a renewed spirit. But much more, he gave them a fresh start; a new day, new hope, and new beginning.

In some ways, we gather together here today much as the Disciples did on that first Easter Sunday. Our hearts and minds are filled with hopes and dreams, with images and memories of springtime, of family dinners, searching for eggs in the yard of our childhood home and the sweet, grainy taste of marshmallow peeps. Like the remaining eleven, our hearts are filled with the memories of how the Lord has been present with us in the past. Some of us may be sitting here today remembering Christ's presence in our lives as a thing of the past, something that once was and then was not, hoping that there is something that we can do to recapture that presence with Him. I am here to testify to you today that there is nothing we can do to recapture the presence of Christ in our lives. People may have left you, friends may have hurt you, relationships of this world may have failed you but as believers I implore you today to recognize that Christ has always been with you and is faithful to remain with you, in good times and in bad. There is nothing we can do to restore a relationship that is **not** broken. "For Christ has said, 'I will never

leave you nor forsake you,' so that we may boldly say, 'The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do to me.'"

We bring to this gathering a certain awareness and realization of our need for the Lord's divine presence and providence to overcome fear, hurt, abandonment, persecution, terrorism and all the dangers and problems of life; war, hunger, homelessness, economic uncertainty, homophobia, the AIDS pandemic, and hurt caused by those claiming to place Christ at the forefront of their lives. Instead of placing Christ first in our lives, let us place him at the center so that all we think, say and do radiate from Him; rather than providing us a shopping list religion that allows us to check Him off and then continue about our day. Yes, we are gathered today very much as did the Disciples that first Easter Sunday, yet in a much more complex way.

And so, the story we read of Christ's resurrection in the Gospel of John is warm and touching--a very personal story. It brings home clearly a basic reason for the Lord's birth, namely, God's endeavor to reconcile His relationship with man. Since the

day that Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, both God and man have sought to restore order the purpose of creation and on the day of Christ's Resurrection, Adam was returned to the Garden and man once again had a means to commune with His Creator. Alas, God provided a way to once again touch us in our everyday lives and move us to new levels of life; to dare to make new ventures, to provide a new day with new hope and new beginnings. Our Lord became as human as we are, and made that humanity part of himself by glorifying and uniting it with his divinity. The humanity that Jesus made part of himself *is still* and *always will be* part of him. Christ has reconciled us with our Creator so that He can communicate with us, guide us and nurture us in our growth.

Have we ever been tired and weary and gloomy? Have we ever been weary and frustrated and at our wit's end? That is the way Jesus' disciples were feeling. Mary Magdalene was weary and weepy and bewildered when Jesus spoke to her--and by speaking to her he turned her whole day around. Jesus does this also with us when we turn to him. Our Lord is only a prayer away.

When we turn to the Lord in prayer, something wonderful happens! We are not intended to be forever burdened by broken dreams. As we meditate and pray, new channels open up through which the Lord can enter and give us a fresh start; a new day, new hope, and new beginning. We may find a broken dream changing into a new one that is more practical, with more hope of achievement. In the mist of mourning over failed plans and in the glimmer of broken dreams we find that Christ is with us and that our plans are not always His plans.

This is what happened to the disciples: their dream of Jesus being with them in a physical way evolved and changed. The Disciples surely had grown comfortable having Jesus with them and had grown to expect that He would be with them for a while; traveling the country side, led by their Master and Teacher, learning of God's love and performing miracles for the His Glory. Then, without any conscious effort, they began to find more power in the inner, spiritual presence of Jesus in their lives. We may find ourselves experiencing this inner presence of the Lord in a similar way. When we turn to the Lord in prayer, we have

thereby entered a different spiritual state, with different spiritual companions and possibilities.

Our Lord is constantly ready and waiting to bestow the blessings of new life on us as we begin our new ventures and new beginnings. He is waiting in the garden of our life, where new life begins. He desires to give us the wisdom, the affection, and the power to make new starts in our spiritual growth, and new beginnings in our everyday life.

What new ventures would we begin? Do we have hopes and dreams? The Lord is waiting now in our garden, as we make plans for new ventures; as we struggle with old problems; work through past pain and hurt; as we seek to serve and to love and to grow; as we continue along the road of life, endeavoring to discover new avenues of usefulness. Even now, as we seek to fulfill our destiny, the Lord is close at hand.

Let us open our hearts and minds ever more fully to his guiding, nurturing, loving providence. Let us place our hopes and plans in *His* hands, knowing that the Lord will help us reshape

them and move toward their fulfillment, so that this Easter may be a fresh start, a new day with new hope . . . a new beginning.

If you are a believer who has lost their way, then let today be a continuation of new life in our Lord Jesus Christ--so that this Easter may mark both *symbolically* and *actually* a day of renewal. If you have never taken the opportunity to accept the New Covenant provided by the blood of our risen Christ, then I implore you to do so today. Mary found the tomb empty that first Easter morning. She sought answers in every way that she knew how. She sought advice from her friends and when that failed her she sat in silence and cried; bewildered at the turn of events the world had offered her.