

SERMON: Words of New Life

TEXT: John 20:1-18

“Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”

“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.”

“Woman, here is your son.”

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

“It is finished.”

Throughout this season of Lent, we have been focused on these words that Jesus spoke while he was dying on the cross. It has been difficult to be faced with his pain and suffering week after week. And yet, we also discovered how his dying words could become words to live by for us.

Furthermore, we have been reminded week after week, that Jesus - even while dying - was concerned for others more than himself. He forgave all those who had played a part or were complicit in having him crucified. He showed mercy to the repentant thief on the cross beside him, and promised him

eternal life. He placed his mother in the care of his best friend, and vice versa. Even while feeling abandoned and forsaken by his Father God, Jesus cried out, praying the words of Psalm 22, which also confess ultimate trust and hope in God. And while he proclaimed, "It is finished," and breathed his last breath, he knew that he would be greeting his friends again with WORDS OF NEW LIFE.

"While it was still dark," Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb. The darkness was not just a condition of the early morning or the lack of light from the sky. It was still dark for Mary in the depths of grief and despair. But it was her love for Jesus that kept her moving to fulfill her desire to care for his body properly.

After discovering that the stone covering the entrance to the tomb had been removed, and assuming that someone had stolen his body, she ran to tell Peter and John. All three of them returned to the tomb, but after the men departed, Mary remained. With little to no sleep, Mary was exhausted. She had

been traumatized by the events of the past several days. Adding to her grief, she now felt afraid and confused and even more lost.

Her head still spinning with questions, she heard a voice question her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She thought it must be the gardener. She didn't recognize him until he spoke her name, "Mary." These questions and this intimate greeting were the first words of the Risen Jesus.

It's curious, isn't it? That anyone would question someone standing outside a tomb or in a cemetery, "Why are you weeping?" Certainly Jesus knows why Mary is weeping. Certainly he knows that she's looking for him.

But he asks these questions, I think, because Mary herself needs to understand.

One Christmas Eve while I was preaching, I got a little choked up as I fought back tears. After the service, a young man

questioned me, "Why did you cry?" It caught me off guard that he would even ask, and for a moment, I didn't know what to say. But then I replied, "Because it means a lot to me. It's important."

He was satisfied with that answer, and I was glad he had asked. Most of us are embarrassed by tears - myself included. We choke them back and wipe them away and try to get past it as quickly as possible, hoping that nobody notices. But more than a young man wanting to understand me, I needed to understand myself. The story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection IS that important. It is too important to keep it to myself, even if it does make me cry. "Why are you weeping," is a WORD OF NEW LIFE.

The next question Jesus asked Mary is just as confusing. "Whom are you looking for?" They had been close friends in life. Mary Magdalene was just as much a disciple as the other twelve; she just didn't get the recognition for it. She was looking for her friend, her confidante, her brother, her mentor, her teacher, her

Lord and Savior. And she was not just looking for his body. She was looking for the one who filled that empty space in her soul that no one else could fill. "Whom are you looking for," is a WORD OF NEW LIFE.

And when he said her name, she recognized him. Earlier in the Gospel of John, we learn about Jesus, the Good Shepherd. "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ...The sheep follow him because they know his voice." (John 10:3-4) Mary knew her shepherd's voice. She had found the One she had been looking for. It's a very personal thing, to call another person by their name. It indicates that a relationship exists. It sends the message that I know you and I consider you important.

Years ago, I knew a young father who tended to yell a lot when his children were misbehaving. And he would often call his sons out by saying, "Boy, you stop that. Boy, come here." He did not call them by name. He called them, "Boy." I found it offensive, and it made me sad for his boys. It felt to me like their

father was distancing himself from them when he did this. It seemed a denial of their relationship, rather than an affirmation of his love for them, which is what they needed, in my opinion. Yes, they needed that voice of authority. They needed clear boundaries and a firm hand. But they also needed a reminder that their behavior wouldn't keep him from loving them.

Mary recognized her beloved friend when Jesus spoke her name. Then she put her arms around him and held on tight. But he said, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." He also didn't want Mary holding on so tight that she wouldn't be able to let go. He was not there to stay, and she needed to understand that. It is not healthy to hang on forever. She would not be able to move forward if she couldn't let go of the past. So, it was for her own good that Jesus told her, "Don't hold on to me."

Finally, the Risen Jesus *called* Mary to share the news. "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father

and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Here again, he is affirming their relationship - "my Father and your Father" - and announcing that they, too, are children of God - "my God and your God." All who seek to follow Jesus belong in the family of God.

Mary Magdalene then preached the first sermon as she ran and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

The Risen Jesus speaks to us as he spoke to Mary that first day of resurrection, while it was still dark. Listen as he calls your name. He knows you. He loves you. He accepts you. He knows what your tears are about. He knows what you're looking for, what your soul needs. The Risen Jesus will show you when to let go of worldly things and when to hold on to him.

Jesus was born for us. Lived for us. Suffered and died for us. And today we celebrate that Jesus has conquered death for us. His arms are open wide for all. Everyone is invited to his Table.

Everyone belongs. He speaks WORDS OF NEW LIFE for all who will hear. May we be so filled with the joy and hope of his resurrection that we cannot help but run and share the good news: "I have seen the Lord!" To the glory of God!

AMEN.