

A RELIEF FOR MARY'S GRIEF

JOHN 20:1-18

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

Then she ran and came to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple, whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken away the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him."

Peter therefore went out, and the other disciple, and were going to the tomb. (This "*other disciple*" is the Gospel's author, John. He often refers to himself in the third person.) So they both ran together, and the other disciple outran Peter and came to the tomb first.

And he, stooping down and looking in, saw the linen cloths lying there; yet he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; and he saw the linen cloths lying there, and the handkerchief that had been around His head, not lying with the linen cloths, but folded together in a place by itself." And for the last 2000 years mothers the world over have been telling their kids the first thing Jesus did after rising from the dead was to *fold His clothes...*

Then the other disciple, who came to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. For as yet they did not know the Scripture, that He must rise again from the dead. Then the disciples went away again to their own homes. But Mary stood outside by the tomb weeping, and as she wept she stooped down and looked into the tomb. And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him."

Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you seeking?" She, supposing Him to be the gardener, 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!" (which is to say, Teacher). Jesus said to her... And here Jesus makes what at first seems to be a cryptic, mysterious comment, but before we're done I think you'll see His statement as words of hope - **a relief for Mary's grief**. For as she reaches to embrace her living Lord, Jesus tells Mary, "Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father,

and to My God and your God.’ Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her.

Have you ever grieved? The word “*grief*” is defined as “a deep mental anguish, as that arising from bereavement.” Grief is the pain and heartbreak caused by a sense of loss. We grieve over the loss of a **loved one**, or the loss of a **job**, or the loss of a **friend**, or the loss of our **health**, or the loss of a **dream** or an **ambition**. Grief is our response to these losses. And grief robs us of the life that’s left... **Hey, grief is a thief.**

Author Edgar Jackson provides us a vivid description of grief... “Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another person for years... Grief is teaching yourself to go to bed without saying “good-night” to the one who has died (or left)... Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they’re not, and will never be again... Grief is a whole cluster of adjustments, apprehensions, and uncertainties that strike life in its forward progress and make it difficult to redirect your energies...”

Grief is the most debilitating of emotions. It paralyzes us and cripples us. You end up fixated on *what you’ll never get back* - and neglect *what needs to be done*. A grieving person isn’t allowed to go backwards, and can’t move forward. Grief leaves us stuck in our pain - *just spinning the tires of regret and throwing up mud*.

And we have no shortage of suggestions for a grieving person: “*O, stop crying over spilt milk...*” “*Just forget it...*” “*Let it go...*” “*It’s time to get on with your life...*” It’s easy to know what a grieving person should do, *until you’re the grieving person*. Shakespeare once said, “*Everyone can master a grief, but he that has it.*” When it comes the subject of grief here’s our problem, “*A heart can be broken, but it still keeps beating.*”

Understand, grief is *the very natural* human reaction to loss. When Mary stuck her head into the tomb and the angels saw her tears streaming down her cheeks *there was no rebuke*. In the midst of the grief she felt over the brutal death of her Savior, it was appropriate that Mary weep. God didn’t begrudge her those tears.

In fact, Psalm 56 says of God, “*You... put my tears into Your bottle.*” *Here’s history’s first case of bottled water!* God is so compassionate toward our sufferings He bottles up every teardrop that falls from our eyes. He doesn’t shelter us from loss and pain, but neither does He abandon us. God is *aware* and God *cares*.

In the words of David in Psalm 30, one day God will turn our “*mourning into dancing...*” He’ll swap our sadness for gladness. He’ll turn our water into wine. Hey, God will even turn our *tears* into *cheers*.

In fact, in the wake of an emotional loss it's vital we weep. When we're still smarting from the sting, *robust weeping - a flood of tears* - helps flush out the pain.

Often the best way to aid someone who's grieving is to share a good cry... I love the story of the little boy who saw his elderly neighbor on the front porch, obviously in pain. He'd been weeping - grieving over the loss of his wife. The little boy went next door, and just sat down on the front porch with his elderly friend.

He was there an hour or so, before he came home. When he walked into the house, his mother asked him what he'd said to their heartbroken neighbor. The little guy replied, "Nothing, I just helped Mr. Johnson cry."

Have you ever been with someone who's just lost a loved one - *a spouse, or a parent, or even a child*? And you didn't know what to say, or what to do...

It's an awkward moment. Here's a thought that might *help you help a friend*... "There's an elephant in the room. It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it. Yet we squeeze by with, "How are you?" and "I'm fine." And a thousand other forms of trivial chatter... We talk about the weather. We talk about work. We talk about everything else - except the elephant in the room. We all know it's there. We're thinking about the elephant as we talk. It's on our minds. It's a very big elephant. But we do not talk about the elephant in the room..."

Oh, please, say his name. Oh, please, say "Robert" again. Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room. For if we talk about his death, perhaps we can talk about his life... Can I say "Robert" and not have you look away? For if I cannot, you are leaving me... alone... in a room... with an elephant..."

Notice here in our text, the angels don't leave Mary *alone... in a room... with an elephant*... They boldly address her grief. They pose a question that prompts her to pour out her heart. Verse 13, "They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, (she probably blurted out to them...) 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.'" Her loss is compounded. *She had watched Jesus die. Now she can't find His body.*

I believe life on this earth is all about coping with loss. We experience grief when we lose a person, or a possession, or a pleasure to which we've grown accustomed. But grief is more than a single interruption.

If I had to choose one word to describe all of life on planet earth it would be "***grief.***" Individual moments of *grief* are but microcosms of life's bigger challenge. For we've all inherited a legacy of grief. It stems all the way back to the Garden of Eden. When God created our first parents, He put Adam and Eve in Paradise. They lacked nothing of beauty or pleasure. All creation was at their disposal. Yet "*all*" wasn't enough for them.

They flirted with the one - the only one - forbidden fruit. And when they bit into *the single thing they couldn't have*, they lost *all that they did have*. And their loss was of gargantuan proportion. Adam and Eve lost paradise, and in their wake subjected every human since, to a world out of sync with its Creator.

I believe you and I are born into this world with this haunting sense of loss. Romans 8:22 tells us “*all creation groans.*” **We grieve** over our sense of loss.

Grief starts in the womb. The first noise that comes out of a newborn's mouth isn't a *cheer*, or a *laugh*, or a *shout of joy* - it's a *cry*. *We weep from the womb.*

And we live our lives everyday looking to somehow get back what we've lost. We try to retrieve it in pieces. Little chunks of happiness here - a flake or two of utopia there. Some people will trade their integrity and dignity - even a commitment to God and to the people they love - for a few seconds of what they think might bring them back to “*paradise.*” I believe deep down all humans operate out of this sense of loss and grief.

Picture Mary Magdalene weeping by the tomb... *this is grief's poster child*. After the death of Jesus no one's grief was greater than Mary's. The other Gospels tell us before she met the Savior, Mary was possessed by seven demons. Jesus delivered Mary from a devilish bondage and a tangled web of evil. And now since Jesus came into her life, she had tasted forgiveness, freedom, healing, peace, acceptance, joy... In a sense, Mary had gotten back a big slice of paradise...

But now she's grieving again... Paradise has been ripped away once more. Jesus is dead. His body gone. Hope has vanished. Mary, it seems, has been forced to rejoin the rest of humanity. And she's returned to the garden *grieving* - longing to have back what she lost.

I love how verses 13 and 14 work together. The angels ask Mary why she's weeping, and she tells them, “*Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.*” *Now when she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, and did not know that it was Jesus...*”

As soon as Mary expresses her grief, and verbalizes her loss, she turns around and what does she see? *She sees Jesus!* And this is a thumbnail of the Gospel.

To truly receive the Gospel **the first step** is to realize that sin - our sin - has caused the loss of all that's good, and beautiful, and satisfying, and ultimately pleasurable. Yet God has a solution for our loss... And **its second step** is *to turn*. That's what Mary did. Verse 14 says, “*she turned around.*” And that's the meaning of the big word we use, but don't really understand, “*repentance.*” To “*repent*” means “*to turn around.*”

All God asks of you is to turn from **the life your living to the life He's giving**. Just turn from where you're at to where God is. When Mary turned around she saw Jesus standing there! Jesus had positioned Himself so when Mary turned He would be there. *And trust me He has done the exact same thing in your life.*

Rather than try to grab back all we've lost in bits and pieces, when we turn to God, He gives us Jesus, and in the risen Lord we find everything we've ever needed.

It reminds me of the wealthy man who had a taste for expensive art. When he died his collection went up for auction. Collectors from all over the world gathered to bid on the various pieces the man had accumulated.

But the first painting to hit the auction block was a painting the man had done himself. It was an *amateurish* portrait of his own son. Of course, the man's painting drew little interest from all the renowned art dealers - they all had bigger fish to catch that day.

Finally one fellow offered a bid. He just wanted to move the auction along... But suddenly, the auctioneer pounded her gavel. She declared the auction over. The entire collection went to the man who had purchased the portrait of the owner's son. *The father desired to give all His riches to the person who'd chosen His Son.*

And this is exactly what God has done. At His resurrection, Jesus came from the grave possessing life, healing, power, joy, wisdom, pardon, love, and peace. Colossians 2:3 tells us, **"(In Christ) are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."** Everything man has lost is ultimately restored in Jesus.

There's an old song by singer Scott Wesley Brown. It's entitled, **"I Wish You Jesus."** **"I could wish you joy and peace to last your whole life long... I could wish you sunshine or a cheerful little song... I could wish you all the happiness that this life could bring... but when I wish you Jesus I've wished you everything."**

On a hill called Calvary, Jesus was nailed to a Roman cross. Through His suffering and death, Jesus made *a double payment*. He **paid off** the penalty of sin that you and I have accumulated... And He **paid for** the riches and treasures that God gives us in Christ...

On an old, pirate's treasure map the location of the gold was always marked with an X. And the same is true with God's treasure. It's still "X" that marks the spot. You find all God intended and all that sin has lost... you regain Paradise at the cross of Jesus Christ

Greg Zanis is a carpenter from Aurora, Illinois. When his father-in-law died from an act of random violence, Greg built an eight foot cross and planted it at the crime

scene. But he was just beginning, since that day, Greg has now made 27,000 crosses. He delivers each one personally, and uses them to point the victims of violence to Jesus. He calls his ministry, "[Crosses for Losses.](#)" But the cross of Jesus was **the ultimate cross for loss**. The riches of Christ and forgiveness of sin has been paid for by what Jesus did on His cross.

So when Mary turned and saw Jesus she didn't recognize Him at first. *And this might be why...* Mary had looked in the tomb, *no Jesus*. That's where she had left His body on Friday. She didn't find Him where she'd seen Him last. Jesus wasn't where Mary expected Him to be, so when the risen Lord does shows-up elsewhere, Mary doesn't recognize Him.

And this is often our problem... We appreciate the sacrifice of Jesus. We know of the price He paid for us. Yet practically speaking, we can leave Him on the cross, or in the grave. We see Jesus in our creeds and church, but we don't expect to find Him outside, *in the garden*. We're not looking for Jesus at the office, or at the ballpark, or at the neighbor's house, or in the dorm.

We think of Jesus in a religious context. We assume His body is still in a shroud. *Oh, He's my Savior. He's forgiven me and promised me heaven*, but do we recognize Him as the answer to my current problems...

Do I see Jesus as *healing for my wound? As love to end my loneliness? As strength for my weakness? As peace that brings rest to my soul?* This is why we too, can easily mistake the Son of God for the Gardener.

It reminds me of the woman who approached her pastor after his Easter sermon and asked, "[So what happened to Jesus after the resurrection?](#)" The pastor wasn't quite sure what she meant. He said, "[Well, Jesus ascended to heaven and He's alive today...](#)"

The lady looked stunned... She said, "[I knew Jesus had been resurrected, but are you sure He's alive?](#)" The pastor said, "[Yes, yes, He's alive!](#)" The reality of it all was finally sinking in. The lady was getting excited, "[Alive! Why didn't you tell me this before now?](#)"

And for the next two weeks this lady was on the telephone calling everyone she knew proclaiming the news, "[Jesus is alive. Did you know He's really alive?!](#)"

This is what I hope hits you today, Jesus didn't just teach the doctrine of resurrection, or was a participant of a religious event called "resurrection," or knew the meaning of Easter. *Jesus is alive. He's out and about!*

Jesus is breathing and walking and getting into stuff, mainly your life! He wants to end your grief, and jump-start your joy. Rather than watch you grieve over your losses, Jesus wants to restore to you new blessings.

One of the features of Christianity is its *statements of faith*. Different Christians, at different times, and in different places - have codified their faith in creeds.

And there's a creed used in Kenya, East Africa, that gives an African flavor to the Christian faith. Here's a portion of the Masai Creed... "We believe that God made good His promise by sending His Son, Jesus Christ, a man in the flesh, a Jew by tribe, born poor in a little village, who left His home and was always on safari doing good, curing people by the power of God, teaching about God and man, showing that the meaning of religion is love. He was rejected by his people, tortured and nailed hands and feet to a cross, and died. He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him, and on the third day, He rose from the grave. He ascended to the skies. He is the Lord."

But notice the distinctly African line, "*He lay buried in the grave, but the hyenas did not touch him...*" Hyenas are scavengers. They eat what other animals kill. Yet neither hyenas, nor Jews, nor Romans, nor death, nor Satan himself could take anything from Jesus. Our Lord rose intact - with His hands full of all that we lack.

And when we realize this - as Mary did - our impulse is to grab Him and hold on tight. We want to cling to Jesus and reach for all that He is and has to give.

When Mary recognized Jesus *not just in her theology, or in her creed, or in the testimony of other believers* - but there, outside the tomb, in the garden, within arm's reach, suddenly her grief vanished.

That's when she grabbed Jesus. We're not told how Mary clung to Him, but I picture Mary falling at His feet and locking both arms around His ankles. It's a wonder she didn't knock Him off balance... Mary wanted to take hold of her Lord, and never let Him go.

Remember, Mary was the woman who'd been a home to seven demons. She's now forgiven and free. *She loves much because she's been forgiven much.* The carpenter had rebuilt her life. This is why I believe that among all the disciples no one's grief was greater than Mary's. Mary Magdalene didn't have family, friends, and a business to return to, like the men. Mary was an orphan who'd finally found a loving Father in Jesus. She didn't want to return to the orphanage.

So when Mary saw Jesus she clung to Him with all her might. She was determined to never loosen her grip. **She would never again be without Jesus.**

But Jesus tells her in verse 17 “**Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father...**” I use to misread this verse. I assumed Jesus was waving off Mary, since there was something peculiar - perhaps radioactive - about a resurrected body. I figured after He rose He was too holy to be touched by humans.

I’ve since come to realize that’s not what Jesus was saying at all! In the next few verses Jesus actually invites Thomas to touch His hands and His side. The issue for Jesus was not *that* Mary touched Him, but *how* she touched Him. Mary “**clung**” to Jesus. The word translated “**clung**” means “**to attach or to fasten.**”

Jesus is saying to Mary... *don’t get attached to my physical presence. I won’t be around in this bodily form much longer. This is not a permanent arrangement.*

After His resurrection Jesus returned to heaven, but that didn’t mean His relationship with Mary ended. **It would never end - but it would change.** Mary would learn to relate to Jesus in another way - *a spiritual way.*

Mary tried to hold on to Jesus. She desired a physical, tangible attachment. But that was not Jesus’ plan. The call of Christ to us all is to *follow NOT fasten.*

Jesus was saying to Mary - and He’s saying to all believers who reread her story at Easter time, “**Rather than tighten your grip, why not strengthen your faith.**”

Realize, there are two great proofs for Christianity. First, is **the resurrection.** Later, in the sanctuary, we’ll examine some evidences for the events that occurred that first Easter. You’ll realize the most plausible explanation for an empty tomb was Jesus’ resurrection.

If “*the risen Lord Jesus*” was a hoax, Christianity would’ve been dead in its tracks. It would’ve crashed and burned before it even started. Without the resurrection there would be no salvation for any of us.

But there were too many eyewitnesses - hundreds if not thousands saw the Lord alive. It would’ve been easy for Christianity’s critics to refute its claims. All they had to do was produce a body, but they couldn’t for the body was alive... Thus, *time reason I am a Christian today is because I am certain of Jesus’ resurrection.*

But there is another proof for Christianity... and this is what Mary learned. We not only believe in the resurrection, but Jesus is alive and meets us where we live. He ascended to heaven, but from there He has sent His Spirit into the world to communicate His plans and presence *in the hearts of those who seek Him.*

If Mary had succeeded in clinging to Jesus, and never letting Him go, He’d still be in Jerusalem somewhere - limited to one place at one time. But Jesus opted for a different relationship with us. Jesus sends *God’s Spirit* to live in *our spirit.* He comes to

live *in us*. There was a time when evil spirits resided in Mary, but after His ascension Mary learned the second proof of Christianity - **the presence of the Holy Spirit**. *Jesus Christ left an empty tomb to fill our empty hearts.*

If you grieve over a loss, here's your hope... Jesus rose from the dead, and has returned to heaven - for He has sent His Spirit to replace *our loss* with *His love*.

Because Jesus rose ... your loss can be redeemed and recovered. Jesus has the ability to make all things new. New hopes, new dreams, new relationships will rise from the ashes when the Spirit of Jesus moves in.

Let me close with Becky Greer and her little girl, Kami. Little Kami handed Becky a beautiful spring lily. She told her, "**Mommy, when the blooms die, plant it outside, and it'll come back next year. That's what the florist said.**" Becky didn't believe the lily would take root again. But Kami insisted, "**The Lady said it will.**"

Finally, just to pacify her daughter, Becky planted the lily in the backyard. And as she suspected, when winter came, the flower died... But also that winter, little Kami died. In fact all four of Becky's children died in a tragic accident. Becky said her world became totally dark.

But the next spring, Kami's lily did come back to life. It sprouted twenty-seven gorgeous pink blossoms. Becky commented, "**I was filled with inexpressible joy in my darkness! My daughter's lily reminded me God can resurrect things we don't believe can be resurrected. I didn't believe that lily would live again, and I didn't believe I could survive my darkness. But God is present even in the darkness of our grief.**"

Jesus rose from the dead, and lives in us to restore what we've lost - He resurrects what we thought was dead. Mary **clung to Jesus** because she loved Him. But she **let Him go** because she realized the incredible possibilities of what He could do through His Spirit.

And those possibilities include you. Jesus lives to resurrect hope and restore your losses. *Turn to God and believe He'll be there!* His *absence from the tomb* and *presence in your heart* is all the proof you need!