

“Whom are you looking for?” A reasonable question for a caretaker to ask a woman weeping outside a tomb. A logical prelude to an offer of help in finding a burial site. Of course, we know though Mary does not, that this is Jesus; so that could not be what or why he is asking.

There is an echo here of the first words Jesus speaks in the Gospel according to John: “What are you looking for?” *What do you seek?* A probing question. He asks it of two men, disciples of John the Baptist. In their hearing, as Jesus is walking by, the Baptist has said, “Look, here is the Lamb of God!” And the two begin to follow Jesus.

He turns and sees them: “*What are you looking for? What do you seek?*”

“Where are you staying?” they ask him. *Where are you abiding? Where do you remain?*

“Come and you will see.”

For centuries, since the time of the Emperor Constantine, pilgrims have come to Jerusalem to see, to find Jesus, believing his presence still abides in the holy places where he walked, taught, healed, suffered and died, and was raised to new life.

Pilgrims come with particular devotion to the church known in the West as Holy Sepulcher, that is known in Jerusalem and the East as the Church of the Resurrection. There is a rock enclosed in the church believed to be Golgatha. In another part of the building is the place believed to be the empty tomb of Christ.

No one can know with any certainty that the revered sites are historically correct, but that has not prevented Christians over the centuries from adorning them with gold, jewels, and everything of beauty they can hold; nor has it prevented Christians from fighting with each other over which churches have valid claim and control over which parts of the building.

A visit could leave a pilgrim feeling confused, empty, with a suspicion that of all places where the risen Christ might be present, *there* he is decidedly absent.

What do *this* day and *this* place have to say to what we are looking for in our life? *What do we seek, here, this morning?*

We come looking for hope, perhaps. An antidote to the darkness and fears of the world and our own lives; or comfort in the midst of disappointment or grievous loss.

We may come seeking meaning; purpose; or righteousness. Not self-righteousness, but a sense we are on the right path, a way of compassion, peace, justice.

We may come to be part of a community of people also seeking something intangible but real; substantive, not superficial; lasting, not disposable; something or someone we can trust, who will be there for us

Mary Magdalene has come seeking, on the first day of the week. The Sabbath has brought her no rest, no relief from sorrow. She has wakened early, well before the sun. She comes in the dark.

Not to *do* anything. There is nothing to do, not even anoint his body. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea took care of that when he was buried.

She comes just to be here, near all that remains of him in this world. To remember. To hope for some sense of his presence abiding still.

But she does not find what she came looking for. Even in the dark she can see that the tomb is open, and that can mean only one thing: “*they*” have taken away even his body! All she hopes for now is to find where “*they*” have taken it; to take it away somewhere where she can mourn him in peace.

She doesn’t know yet that he will never stay put. Even when she finds him—or, rather, he finds her—she will not be able to hold onto him.

An interlude follows: two disciples running, looking, seeing for themselves—Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved. They look into the tomb; they go in. Nobody; no body. They see his burial cloths left behind.

The beloved disciple sees these things and believes: Jesus has risen from the dead!

How can he know this, when the gospel writer tells us that “as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead”?

It was not his first thought, certainly, when Mary came with her news of a stolen corpse. It is in *seeing* that he realizes: no one would take time to unwrap a body and carry it away naked. In an instant he sees that Jesus himself has left death and the clothes of death behind.

Jesus loved all his disciples, but this one he loved most deeply. At the cross, he recognized and blessed this closest relationship, giving the disciple to his own mother as her son; giving her to the disciple as his mother.

Being this grounded and centered in Jesus, in love, gives the disciple clearer sight, quicker insight. Peter—also loved, also close to Jesus—sees the same things, but does not yet realize their meaning.

What we see, what we find, seems a very particular, intimate experience. There’s nothing guaranteed about it.

Both men are oddly silent here. Not a word to each other or to Mary. The gospel writer gets them quickly off the scene. What’s next is for Mary alone.

Weeping now, for sorrow, for love, and maybe in some frustration because these two have been no help to her at all, Mary takes a look into the tomb for herself. And what a sight: two angels, divine messengers! What an opportunity! “Woman, why are you weeping?” they ask. A suggestion, perhaps, that her behavior is odd? That she should rejoice, instead?

She doesn’t ask, *Who are you? What are you? Why are you here? What is going on?* With dulled senses and clouded thinking, not a ripple of new possibility crosses her mind. She sticks with her first conviction: “they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” And the angels are no more help to her than were the two disciples.

She turns away from the tomb. He is there! Has he been there, outside the tomb, in the garden all along, waiting for her to see him? Still she does not know him, though she does suspect that he might have something to do with the missing body: “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

Oh, no, you won’t! He will go without your help, just as he was raised.

“Mary!” Why, he’s not the gardener after all, but the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep by name! Now, finally, she recognizes him. Mary comes back together, back to her senses and her sense of herself. Her teacher and lord is restored to her!

“Rabbouni!” She reaches to take hold of him. “Do not hold onto me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father.”

Things are not back where they were, and never will be, never could be.

He did not stay put in the tomb, would not, could not stay in death. Raised from the dead, he will not stay in the world, even as he was. He never was *of* this world; never confined by this world or its ways, in life or in death.

Jesus, crucified and resurrected, is living a new kind of life now,
The life to which he does belong,
The life to which he is returning
The life into which he welcomes all who seek him—
The life he shares with them and the Father.

“Go and tell my brothers”—and I daresay his sisters were there, too—“I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”

Leaving again, so soon? Yes; and leaving for *good* because when he returns to the Father, his presence will abide with us forever . . . until he comes again.

All who come to him are in new relationship with him, with God, and one another now. All are his brothers and sisters; all are children of the same Father.

On my last morning in Jerusalem, I had time to visit only one place before leaving for the airport. To my surprise, I found myself walking back to the Church of the Resurrection.

It was as occupied with the same kind of showy ceremony that had felt so discordant on my earlier visits. I sat down on the floor, leaning against a wall, and looked across to the tomb that stands all by itself under a great dome overhead. I watched a ritual of some kind, lots of lighting of candles, priests entering and leaving the tomb.

Why had I come? If it was to find Christ, I was disappointed. He was so absent. The place was thick with his absence.

I sat; I waited. I did not see him. Did not hear him call my name. Never expected that I would. Everyone knows he left Jerusalem, anyway, and went back to Galilee after the Resurrection.

And then, in his very absence, he was so present, so astonishingly present. Not in the *place*—in the emptiness.

Where is he staying? Where does he abide now? Here, there, anywhere, everywhere, in and among any and all who seek him. Even in the most unlikely places. Even when the world is the most dark, empty, lifeless.

The crucified and risen Lord is ready to meet us where we are, in our blindness and confusion, in our stubbornness and despair

To give us sight, as much as we can bear

To give us life, as much abundance as we will receive.