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Encounters: The Tearful

John 20:11-18

Last Monday I sent the following e mail: *"Next Sunday I begin a new series called "Encounters" that deals with John's post-resurrection appearances of Jesus. I need your help. For the first sermon, I will be dealing with the pain of loss. Could you send one or two sentences (only) summarizing a moment of great loss in your life? What it was and how it made you feel."*

This was the response. 25 single-spaced pages. 158 stories. It was like I had opened a flood gate. And I must tell you, it was one of the most painful and poignant moments for me in my pastoral career. I read every single response. More than once. I prayed over them. I underlined. The loss of love, loss of a spouse, loss of a child, loss of a sibling and friend, the loss of health, the loss of hope. Listen to a fragment of these stories:

"...the day my father left my mother, me and my sister. I was 12... my wife having an extra-marital affair; there was nothing I could do, I felt completely helpless... my church has thoroughly disappointed me...

"my son took his life... my five year old son, Joe, died of a brain tumor... we lost our little Noah to AIDS... I came upon my daughter lying in a ditch after hitting a pickup truck on her dirt bike... my son announced he had become an atheist...

"...my mentor was killed by a drunk driver... I lost my best friend to a mountain climbing accident when he was 20... I lost my cousin in a plane crash a week before his wedding. My plane ticket for a wedding became a ticket to a funeral...

"...the illness and death of my mother days after my 17th birthday... my one year old brother drowning... when my father's heartbeat numbers went to zero, I dropped to my knees and sobbed... losing my wife to cancer—devastating loneliness... I went to my father's death bed to get him to accept Jesus; he said he couldn't do that, and I watched him pump his morphine trigger until he died in front of me...

"Parkinson's... Alzheimer's... the doctor saying, "Your son won't be able to walk by the time you come back next year... arthritis in my 40s... losing my vision in my 30s"

"my husband went to prison... I was flying Search and Rescue in Alaska and coming on a crew of a sunken fishing boat, we ran to the limits of our fuel, and with the captain still in the water looking right into my eyes, I had to order the

basket brought aboard and departed the scene, leaving him to perish in the Gulf of Alaska..." Loss!

As the week progressed, I felt an increasing heaviness in my spirit over the pain that jumped off these pages. I don't think I ever felt more deeply the sense of being a shepherd of a flock. Thursday morning, again, I looked at the wrinkled pages in my hands... and started weeping. How do you comfort such pain? How do you face such loss?

This morning, in our first encounter with the risen Christ, we discover a woman in great pain because of great loss. May the story of this encounter bring comfort to those this day who deal with the pain of their loss. [Read John 20: 11-18 ESV]

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." 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.

There are few characters in the New Testament around whom more myths have been woven than this woman. "She was a prostitute. She was the one who anointed Jesus' feet with oil. She was Jesus' wife." Wrong, wrong, wrong! The only things we know about Mary was that she was from Magdala, a town on the Sea of Galilee, and that Jesus cast seven demons out of her! Imagine that! Tormented by seven demons until Jesus of Nazareth set her free. Mary's life was transformed and she never forgot her savior.

So, while the rest of the disciples were hiding in fear, it was faithful, grateful Mary who came to Jesus' tomb. When she discovered the stone had been removed, she fetched the disciples. But even after Peter and John ran back, saw the linen strips in the empty tomb and believed, Mary still didn't get it. She stood on the outside, weeping convulsively. She had come to mourn her dead master. But now, because grave robbers had stolen his body, she wouldn't even have **that** solace. She had lost Jesus in life... and now, she had lost him in death, too. Devastating! And it is in that crestfallen, tearful state, that Mary encounters the risen Christ.

I know from this pile of pain that you understand what loss feels like. Is there something from this story that can help us deal with **our** devastating loss? I think so.

First, the story teaches us: **Mourn**. Mourn your loss. Why did Mary come to the tomb of Jesus that morning? Other gospels tell us that she came to finish preparing his body. Not John. Joseph and Nicodemus have already done that. Whatever tidying up Mary might have planned on doing, John doesn't mention it. So then why did she come? To mourn! It was part of their tradition that women would weep and wail and lament the death of a loved one. Loudly! But because Jesus was buried on the Sabbath, her lamentations were cut short. Rabbis believed that the third day after death was the best time to mourn over a body; any longer than that and that considered it superstitious! So Mary came on the third day to mourn properly.

In many parts of the world today, lament is still an important part of grieving. Unfortunately, it is not part of our culture. It is not manly to cry. Women muffle their sobs in hankies so as not be too obtrusive. We hide the family behind a curtain at the funeral home so that no one can witness their grief. And after certain time has passed following loss, the last thing you do is mention it. After all, if you ask how they are doing, it might bring back memories. Might make them cry again. And that might make you uncomfortable because you won't know how to "fix it."

The first and most important thing to do with loss is to mourn it. To embrace the pain for what it is. Jerry Sittser, a Whitworth professor, experienced almost unfathomable loss. His family van was struck by a drunk driver and in that one accident, Gerry lost his wife, his mother and a daughter... three generations. He writes of a nightmare that haunted him for weeks. Every night, he would see an ominous tsunami rushing toward him. He would turn and run but to no avail. The tide would overtake him and he would awaken, terrified. Night after night this happened. He was exhausted. But one night, as the wave started toward him, he heard God's voice telling him to plunge into the wave. He did, expecting to be killed. Instead, he found himself going through the wall of water and floating on top.

If you try to outrun your grief, it will swallow you up. It always will. You are not fast enough, and you cannot outlast it. My mother's loss story was the sudden death of her brother at the age of 17. Uncle Clayton collapsed and died in the school gym when mom was 14. On the way home friends told her, "Don't cry in front of your parents. It will be hard on them." She was never permitted to delve into the depth of her grief over the loss a young man whom she idolized. To this day, 63 years later, it is still a point of unresolved pain for her.

One woman wrote to me of this loss story: "Five months into my first pregnancy, the baby died. My own mother said, 'It's all right dear, don't worry. *No one will*

know.'" "Shhh....keep it a secret. Don't let anyone know of your loss and pain. We can hide it for you." **That is awful, toxic advice.** If you have never felt free to mourn your loss, you must do so. If it has been a long time, you may need a lay counselor or even a therapist to help you get in touch with it. But I guarantee, if you try to outrun your grief, it will swallow you up. The first step to dealing with loss? Mourn it!

Second hint from this story? **Let your crying end.** Did you notice the question asked twice of Mary? First by the angels and then by Jesus. "Why are you crying?" This is a very important and powerful question. It forces Mary to actually ask herself the question, "Why am I crying? Why am I continuing to cry?" You see, the time had come for her to finish her crying. The tomb was empty. The grave clothes testified to the resurrection of Jesus. Peter and John believed it. But Mary was stuck in her old reality. She had decided that the body was stolen and her tear-swollen eyes could not see the new, hope-filled future... even when He was standing before her. She was stuck... still grieving. She couldn't get past it.

So the question: "Why are you crying?" When we suffer loss, at some point, someone has to ask us that question—maybe a friend, maybe we ourselves—and we must have the courage to answer it. The answer might be, "Because I am still broken-hearted; I am still grieving. I am not yet done mourning." That's okay. I warn those who have experienced deep loss that they might as well count on two years before a day passes without remembering the pain. Grief has a long half-life.

But the answer to the question might be, "Because I'm used to crying. I'm used to living in grief. It has become my default and I don't know any other way to live." Healthy grief means that you mourn fully, and then you let your crying end. You grapple honestly and deeply with your pain and then, finally, you say "Okay, that's that... time to put my mourning away. Time to see a new future."

Psalm 126 says, "***Those who sow in tears will reap with songs of joy.***" This promise is repeated throughout scripture: If we grieve well—which means grieving honestly, yet hopefully, because we belong to God and he can be trusted—there comes a time when our tears must stop.

Mourn, Let Your Crying End, and **Release it.** Do you remember when Jesus said, "I Am the Good Shepherd?" How did he say his sheep would know him? "I call my sheep by name." The moment Jesus said, "Miriam," her eyes and ears and heart were opened. "Rabboni!" she cried out. And Jesus' next words are interesting: "Do not cling to me." Older translations read, "Do not touch me." But that is not correct. The Greek clearly means, "Do not **keep** touching me... do not hold onto me, do not cling to me." Why does Jesus say this? Because Mary was clinging to him! She heard her name, recognized her master and rushed to embrace him.

That's okay. It was a natural response of relief and joy. Jesus was alive and here, not dead and stolen! But at some point in that hug Jesus said, "Okay, that's enough. You have to let me go." Why? Because he had to return to the Father. Why? Well, he told them back in the upper room (16). ***"Unless I go away, the Counselor [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you."***

Here's what Jesus was saying: "While I am here, I am one person. I cannot be everywhere. It is the limitation of my human body. But if I return to my Father, then I will send my Spirit to live inside of all of you. Then everyone everywhere will experience my presence in their lives at all times."

Mary thought she had lost Jesus. When she got him back, she wrapped her arms around him as if to say, "I am never going to let you go again." How can that be a bad thing? Clinging to Jesus? Because it was selfish. And short-sighted. Yes, Mary would be comforted, but no one else would be. And the greater mission of God to the whole world would not be accomplished. Mary had to let Jesus go!

When we were in Yellowstone last summer, the rivers were filled with fly fishermen. I was surprised to discover fishing was allowed there. Then I found out what kind of fishing it was. Any guess? Catch and release. You have the thrill of catching a fish, but for the sake of others you do not keep it. You cannot cling to it. You **release** it.

There are all kinds of things to which we cling that never allow us to get past our loss and move into God's future. We cling to old memories. We cling to fantasies about how things might have been. We cling to offenses...a spouse or a friend or a church that has disappointed us. We cling to poor substitutes...unhealthy relationships, unhealthy habits. And sometimes the things that we cling to are good...they just aren't best. It's time to let go; to release. **Mourn, Let the Crying End, Release.**

Finally—and this one might seem odd at first, but hang in there with me—**Rehearse**. What is a rehearsal? It's where you gather with other members of the cast of a show and practice saying your lines together in preparation for opening night. How many of you have been in a play? You remember that at first, the lines are unfamiliar. You have trouble remembering them. And when you go off script, from time to time in rehearsal, you forget what you are supposed to say and ask for help by shouting "Line!" But as you rehearse together over and over again, pretty soon the lines become part of you. The story becomes second nature. And then comes opening night.

Jesus sent Mary off to the "brothers" to announce the incredible news that he was alive. Death was defeated. Nothing would ever be the same again. Did they understand completely what she was saying? No. Did they have some doubts? Yes. But they received her message and together, began to rehearse the lines

they would repeat again and again until the whole world had heard the news. "He is risen. The Lord is alive!"

Was it the end of death and persecution for them? No. All but one of them would die a martyr's death. But they kept rehearsing their lines. When one stumbled and forgot, another would remind. Because they knew that one day Jesus would make good on the rest of His promises. One day they would be with him in the place John described in the Revelation: *"The dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Someday, opening night... but for now, rehearsal. Remember and repeat together the single truth that will sustain us all in the face of crushing loss: "The Lord is alive! Jesus is alive. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!" Here we come to the uniquely Christian response to loss. Every other principle we've lifted from this passage could be affirmed by pagans. But if we claim to be followers of the Resurrected One—if we claim to believe that God is in control even when the circumstances of our lives seem utterly and painfully out of control—then that is the moment we decide whether we really believe what we say we believe. That Jesus is Lord, that Jesus is alive, that there is hope beyond loss.

When I read through this litany of loss, even though I asked for a sentence or two, many of you could not help yourselves. You had to rehearse your lines of hope to me: "I felt helpless, yet I knew God was in control and it kept my husband and me on our knees... God's love covers all... I have lost an infant son, my parents, my dear daughter-in-law, but I felt comforted and at peace knowing they were in God's presence, and he filled the gaping holes of each one's absence in my life with the 'peace that passes understanding.'" And on and on and on you went—scores of you—rehearsing your lines of hope.

You remember three weeks ago I was in Fairbanks, Alaska welcoming First Presbyterian Church into our denomination. Thursday evening, Sarah Ekblad, the daughter of Senior Pastor Andy and his wife, Mary Ekblad, died unexpectedly. Sarah had been severely disabled from birth. She was in a wheelchair, blind, could not speak. But she was in worship that Sunday morning. And when her Daddy spoke, she recognized his voice and would reply back with a loud response!

I prayed with the Ekblads on the phone yesterday as they wept and mourned the loss of Sarah. And I was able to say this: "Now Sarah recognizes the voice of her Heavenly Father. And she can see and shout back and sing and dance and worship him as she never could before. For this moment, we grieve. But one day we will see her and Jesus face to face, and together, we will worship him forever. He is risen. He is risen indeed." **That is the ultimate solution to loss.** That is the line that we will rehearse to each other and to the world until every loss has been redeemed. Hallelujah!

Sermon Questions

- REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER: Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.
- PRAY TOGETHER: Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.
- DIG DEEPER
 1. Mary Magdalene has been called "The Apostle to the Apostles." What is meant by that phrase? How does Mary's witness strengthen the reliability of the resurrection account?
 2. Mary seemed not to believe as quickly as the disciples did. Why was that?
 3. What did Jesus mean when he said, "Stop clinging to me?" How did he help Mary move beyond her grief and onto purpose?
 4. What might this encounter teach us about dealing with our own loss?