

**Series: Witness of the Windows**  
**Today: Why are you Weeping?**  
**Text: John 20:11-18**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**  
**Sunday, November 6, 2011**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

### **History of the Window**

Believe it or not, this is the ninth week in our series on the scriptures which inspired the windows in our Sanctuary. After today, we will focus on two more before Advent, and we shall return to the final window, The Magi window, on New Year's Day when we will celebrate an early Epiphany.

Today our focus is the window entitled "The Garden." In it Christ is pictured in the garden with Mary Magdalene who has not yet recognized him as the risen Christ. In order to craft this window, Louis Comfort Tiffany copied a fresco by Friar Angelico who was a 15<sup>th</sup> century Dominican friar in the monastery at Fiesole. The convent of San Marco was taken over by his Order in 1436, and he was commissioned to decorate the friar's cells with frescoes painted directly on to wet plaster walls. These were intended to stimulate prayer and meditation rather than to be a factual record of the Biblical story. He wanted to represent the sacredness of Christ in all its glory and simplicity.

The particular fresco which Tiffany copied was found in Cell #1 of the Convent of San Marco in Florence, Italy. In it Christ appears to Mary Magdalene. She has been weeping after discovering that his tomb is empty. A figure appears. At first she mistakes him for a gardener which is portrayed by Christ who is carrying a garden tool; a hoe. Suddenly realizing who it is, she goes to embrace him. But he moves away, telling her not to touch him for he has not yet ascended to heaven.

The window which portrays this fresco is on the west wall once again. It was commissioned in 1916 by Elizabeth Hensel Nauman to memorialize her grandmother, Elizabeth Kieffer Flinn and her

parents, Emily Flinn Hensel and William Uhler Hensel. It is based on the story of the resurrection found in the Gospel of John chapter 20 verses 11-18. I invite you to listen for the word of God:

*<sup>11</sup> Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb <sup>12</sup> and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. <sup>13</sup> They 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." <sup>14</sup> At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> He asked her, "Woman, 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." <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, "Mary."*

*She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher"). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"*

*<sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.*

### **The Message**

This past Tuesday was November 1<sup>st</sup>. In our culture it is the day after All Hallows Eve or Halloween. It is a signal to retailers that it is time to get ready for Black Friday and the Christmas shopping season, but in the church we call it All Saints Day; the day we honor those who have died in Christ since last November 1<sup>st</sup>. We don't have special services on All Saints Day like our Roman Catholic brothers and sisters, so we honor the day on the Sunday which follows November 1<sup>st</sup>.

Today we honor 20 of the saints of First Presbyterian Church who have died since last November 1<sup>st</sup> by lighting a candle in their memory. We have invited families of these dear people to join us today in this ceremony, and in each of our services there will be family members present waiting for that part of our service. So today I am acutely aware that not everyone who comes to church arrives with feelings of joy. In spite of the music, the flowers, and the festive outfits, there are some of us here who come with heavy loads to carry because they have lost a loved one; or they have lost a job; or they have ended a relationship; or they have children in harm's way; or they are facing any number of other trials which

make them candidates to understand the message of pain and suffering which is proclaimed in the Passion of Christ, but they may not be ready to celebrate the resurrection which is portrayed in our window and in the scripture on which the window is based.

So that is precisely where I want to begin this morning as we examine our scripture. How does someone, whose life is filled with nothing but sadness, find a message of hope and joy as they honor the death of someone they love? May I suggest to you that John 20:11-18 gives us a process through which we must move if we are to find hope in the face of despair. Here it is in a nutshell: 1) Dare to Weep; 2) Dare to Share; 3) Dare to Believe.

### **DARE TO WEEP**

First, dare to weep. The first Easter, according to our scripture lesson for this morning, did not begin with joy. It began with grief. The women went to the tomb to do what could not be done properly on Good Friday. They went to prepare the body of Jesus for a proper Jewish burial with ritual washing and the anointing of the body with perfumed oils. The first Easter did not begin with joy. It began with shock and dismay. It began with tears near a grave. Grief is an appropriate response to the loss of someone or something that we hold very dear.

Edgar Jackson, who has studied the grief process for decades, describes the feelings people have when they are faced with the news that someone they love has died: *Grief is a young widow trying to raise her three children, alone. Grief is the man so filled with shocked uncertainty and confusion that he strikes out at the nearest person. Grief is a mother walking daily to a nearby cemetery to stand quietly and alone a few minutes before going about the tasks of the day. She knows that a part of her is in the cemetery, just as part of her is in her daily work. Grief is silent, knife-like terror and sadness that comes a hundred times a day, when you start to speak to someone who is no longer there. Grief is the emptiness that comes when you eat alone after eating with another for many years. Grief is teaching*

*yourself to go to bed without saying good night to the one who has died. Grief is the helpless wishing that things were different when you know they are not and never will 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 the energies of life.*

Dare to weep. Sadness is the human response to loss. It is biblical, and it is natural. To avoid it leads to becoming stuck with emotions so powerful that they will destroy you and the relationships which you hold dear.

### **DARE TO SHARE**

Next, dare to share. Find someone with whom you can share your grief in an environment of safety. The angel (which by the way means ‘messengers of God’) asks Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping?” And she tells them about her loss.

It is the healthiest thing she could have done. She had a number of choices that she could have made. She could have apologized, “Oh, I’m sorry. I know I shouldn’t be so emotional.” She could have denied it, “I’m not crying, really. I just have something in my eye.” However, she chose to be honest with the angels and with Jesus, whom she thought was a gardener. “I am weeping because I loved the man, and now they have taken his body, and I don’t know where they put it.”

Bill Hybels, pastor of Willow Creek Church outside Chicago, once reminded his congregation that grief that is kept to itself, grief that is buried from public view, can become toxic. Listen to what he said: *“Fifty years ago industrialists thought they could just bury toxic waste and it would go away. We have since learned it doesn't just go away. It makes trouble. It leaks into the water table, contaminates crops, and kills animals. Buried grief does the same thing. Some would say that time heals all wounds, but that is not necessarily true. Time doesn't heal a thing. Buried pain leaks into our emotional system*

*and wreaks havoc there. It distorts our perceptions of life, and it taints our relationships. That contamination happens subconsciously.”* (from *A Better Kind of Grieving*, Preaching Today, tape 108).

Share your pain with someone else. If you don't have anyone else whom you can trust, one of us on the staff would be honored to be trusted with your grief. If you need more help, or if you are embarrassed sharing with us, allow us to recommend someone on the staff of the Samaritan Counseling Center who specializes in loss, and we will even get you started on your healing journey with one of the vouchers we receive because we are a partner church.

It doesn't need to be loss from a death. Grief is the process of reorganizing your life after you have experienced the loss of someone or something which requires a major reorientation of your life. It can be a relationship, a career, a home, or a change in your family situation. Whatever it is that may be keeping you from enjoying the fullness of life, find someone whom you trust and talk about it or risk the possibility of those feelings becoming toxic and destroying you and those you love.

### **DARE TO BELIEVE**

Finally, dare to believe. Dare to believe that power of God in your life is stronger than whatever painful experience you are going through that is keeping you from knowing the joy of Easter. Dare to believe that whatever holds you hostage cannot compare to the freedom and new life that is offered in the power of God over the power of death.

There is a story told of a spy who was captured and then sentenced to death by a general in the Persian army. This general had the strange custom of giving condemned criminals a choice between the firing squad and the big, black door. As the moment for execution drew near, the spy was brought to the Persian general, who asked the question, "What will it be: the firing squad or the big, black door?"

The spy hesitated for a long time. It was a difficult decision. He chose the firing squad. Moments later shots rang out confirming his execution. The general turned to his aide and said, "They always prefer the known way to the unknown. It is characteristic of people to be afraid of the undefined. Yet, we gave him a choice."

The aide said, "What lies beyond the big black door?" "Freedom," replied the general, "but I've known only a few brave enough to take it."

### CONCLUSION

Mary wept. Then she shared her pain, and it was the risen Christ who healed her with one word—her name. "*Mary!*" No one called her by name like the one who gave meaning and purpose to her life.

She thought he was dead. She had come to give him a proper burial, and when she hears him call her by name, she dares to believe that the power of God is stronger than the power of death, and in that moment she believes that her life is not over, either. There is work for her to do, and she runs to share with the disciples the good news which she has received, in which she stands, and by which she is saved.

Friends, if you dare to believe this morning, you have been given good news to share, as well. And there are those who are waiting to hear it. Call them by name. Speak to them at the point of their need. Tell them what the Lord has done for you, and what the Lord can do for them, if they dare to believe in the power of the resurrection.