

The very first Easter was not all that joyful, or at least it didn't start with much joy. Quite the opposite, in fact. John's description of that morning is full of confusion, grief, and fear. It begins with Mary heading out to the tomb with a sorrowful heart to say a final goodbye to her Beloved Jesus. Upon arriving at the tomb and finding it empty, she doesn't immediately think "oh, he has obviously risen from the dead". No, instead she assumes the most rational thing she could; that someone had removed the body. And this so upsets Mary that she weeps. She weeps because it seems his grave has been desecrated. She weeps because he is gone; not just dead, but gone. I can imagine heartbreak moving through her body and escaping in a convulsive cry of loss as she looks into the tomb one more time, hoping that she has been mistaken.

It's curious that the angels that she finds in the tomb, and Jesus, who she thinks is a gardener, both ask her why she is weeping. The use of irony here feeds this curiosity because we all understand the insinuation that she has no need for tears. We know something that Mary doesn't. But when Mary does *realize* that the one standing in front of her is actually her beloved teacher, the weeping stops and she does what I think anyone who has lost a loved one would do; she instinctively reaches for him. She wants to hold and embrace him. She wants to be assured that he is really there.

In a book about the dying of her friend and mentor, Episcopal priest Cynthia Bourgeault writes with great care about the growing presence of Christ as an energy between her and her friend; a pure love and compassion. After he had died, that love proved to be *stronger than death*. Bourgeault insists that she feels that presence, his presence through the energy of Christ that joins them, even today, many years after her teacher's passing.

In recalling the process she went through of recognizing the presence of her friend, after he had died, and accepting it for what it was, Bourgeault wrote this entry in her journal:

"Once early on, as I was struggling to sort out in my mind the confusing and sketchy details of his life, I suddenly heard him say, "Quit it! It's useless to rummage about in my life. Who I was in life was incomplete. Instead, accept who I am now - what I am growing into...Take up your life and live it. And I will be there in the midst of it. There in your heart. Live your life as the gift it is."

I think that Jesus might have been trying to say a similar thing to Mary. He seems to encourage her to (1) not let her grief overwhelm her, and (2) not hold onto *only* what she remembers about him - the person she has created in her own mind. (3) But instead, to be open to the new person he has become - the Jesus shaped by resurrection, the Jesus who is with her in that moment and will be with her as she lives the gift of her own life.

When we lose a loved one, or we undergo dramatic difficult change, it can often take a lot of effort to keep grief from becoming all we see or feel. My heart has been breaking daily as I

watch the world news. Children are suffering from hunger in countries both far from here and in communities that are very close. Families are being decimated in Gaza. Both civilians and soldiers suffer in Ukraine and Russia. People immigrating to the US are living in constant fear, voting rights are being challenged, and the cost of basic needs and medical care continue to rise. Our world is a mess, and the grief many of us feel is very real whether it's from what's happening in the bigger picture or what's happening in our own lives. And again and again I have heard people say, "the only way to get through these current challenges we face, is if we do it together."

I'd like to share a story with you about a traditional South African practice that embraces this value of togetherness. It's called "The Village That Wept Together"

In a rural village in the Eastern Cape of South Africa, an elder named Mama Zanele passed away. She was known not only for her storytelling and herbal remedies, but for raising children who weren't her own, feeding neighbors from her small garden, and never letting anyone eat alone.

When she died, her family was overwhelmed—not just with grief, but with the cost of the funeral. Her son, Thabo, a teacher in a nearby town, returned home burdened. He stood before the community and quietly said, "We want to give Mama Zanele the farewell she deserves. But I don't know how." An elder from another family stood up. He said simply, "We will carry this together. Because your mother belonged to all of us." Over the next few days, neighbors brought firewood and maize meal, chickens for stew, linens to dress the body, and flowers gathered from the hills.

The women sang traditional songs while preparing food. The men dug her grave with their own hands. Young people helped clean and paint the family home. And each evening, the community sat together, sharing stories around a fire. They wept, but they also laughed—telling tales of how Mama Zanele once danced in the rain or scolded someone for not greeting her properly. At her funeral, the pastor said: "**Ubuntu means: I am \ because you are.** Mama Zanele lived this truth. And today, we live it for her."

Our grief is sacred and must be honored, AND we always have more inside of us than just our pain. Grief need not crowd out other truths such as the truth that we have loved and been loved. That we are not alone. That there is still hope in the land of the living. Jesus met Mary in her sorrow and offered her a reason to hope.

Poet Jan Richardson always seems to offer words that give me hope. In her poem "Blessing of Hope" she speaks of a hope that is not just for someday but for this day. She calls it a hope "made of sinew, and muscle, and bone...a "hope that has breath and a beating heart." Not a

quiet and polite hope, she says. No, this hope knows "how to holler when it is called for..." It's a hope that knows how to sing when there seems little cause; a hope that raises us from the dead

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not someday
but this day,
every day,
again and
again and
Again.

Our faith in a risen Christ insists that there is so much more to our love than simply what we know and understand. The love that we have come to know through Christ is stronger than anything life or death can throw our way, and the hope that moves hand-in-hand with our grief, is central to who we are; a Resurrection People, and we are what we are because of who we are together. Ours is a hope that we don't just imagine or feel, but embody, and our job is to live our lives knowing that the Spirit of Christ is truly here; *always* here empowering us to do the hard work of the Gospel. May our hearts be open to that truth. And to this truth - that Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah.