

# Questions

GOD ASKS US



## Why Are You Crying?

Over the past few years I have noticed that tears come much more easily to me than they used to. There could be a number of reasons for this. It may have something to do with getting older. Maybe, as the years go by, I am becoming more vulnerable. Or they may be linked to some past sadness that I have not fully dealt with. One of my favorite authors suggests that as we move through our fifties previously unexpressed sides of our personality sometimes begin to show themselves. Perhaps my recent tearfulness is linked to some hidden grief or pain that I have not worked through.

Perhaps you also find your tears flowing more freely as you get older. Or maybe they are hidden away in a secret room of your heart. Whether they roll down your cheeks or remain bottled up inside, your tears may reflect any number of things. They may indicate grief over the death of a loved person, the breakup of a special relationship, a deep disappointment, the loss of a job, or they may point toward a deep unmet longing that is sometimes too painful for you to name. The list goes on.

The good news is that our tears do not always have to end in sadness. They can lead us toward healing and growth and new beginnings. They can open our eyes to angelic presences, human and divine, all around us. They can make our hearts more receptive to a deeper experience of God. They can become the means by which our whole lives are profoundly transformed. This is our discovery when we engage the question that the risen Jesus put to Mary Magdalene on that first Easter Sunday morning. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” (John 20:15).

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 110-11

### Jesus’ Question to Mary

**Read John 20:1-18.** Mary Magdalene, who was present at the empty tomb in all four Gospels, appears alone at the tomb in the Gospel of John. As she notes the removal of the stone from the tomb, she assumes that its removal means that someone has stolen Jesus’ body. She runs to Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved to report what she has seen.

Responding to Mary's concern, Peter and the beloved disciple also run to the tomb. The other disciple sees the linen clothes but does not enter the tomb. Peter enters the tomb and sees the linen wrappings and also the head covering. Then the other disciple "also went in, and he saw and believed" (v. 8). While this disciple does not yet know the full story of the resurrection, he probably believes in some sense that Jesus has overcome death, even before he fully understands.

Mary Magdalene's story picks up again in verse 11. Mary now looks into the tomb and sees something that the other disciples have not seen: "two angels in white" (v. 12). The angels do not announce Jesus' resurrection, but instead keep the focus on Mary's grief. She repeats her statement to the disciples: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (v. 13), but her grief is now more personal ("my Lord"). Even the presence of angels does not sway Mary's concern for the whereabouts of her Lord.

Verse 14 establishes the dramatic tension and power of the story: because John tells the reader that the "gardener" is Jesus, the reader knows what Mary does not know, and so waits for the moment of recognition. Jesus' questions reinforce the drama of the mistaken identity. He echoes the question of the angels, "Woman, why are you weeping?" As Jesus has promised, her weeping will turn to rejoicing (see John 16:20-22). Jesus' second question reminds us of the very first question to the disciples at the beginning of John's Gospel: "Whom are you looking for?" Like that first question, Jesus takes the initiative in asking Mary what she needs.

### Tears Are Okay

Jesus' question to Mary reminds us that tears are okay. Tears reflect the fact that we are vulnerable, fallible, and fragile human beings. Jesus knew this only too well. In his Sermon on the Mount he pronounced a special blessing on those who mourn. He himself was no stranger to tears. When he saw the grief of Mary and Martha for their brother Lazarus, he also wept (John 11:35). Not surprisingly, therefore, when he found Mary crying outside the tomb, he did not condemn her. Rather, he accepted her tears and reached out to her in need.

Many of us, especially men, feel uncomfortable with our tears. Deep down we regard them as a sign of weakness. Perhaps, for some deep reason your heart has become so hardened that you have forgotten how to cry. I pray that Jesus' question will help you to remember. Learning to cry again could bring about the beginning of a new journey toward wholeness, as it did for Mary. **Our tears put us in touch with our pain. They help us know where we are hurting.**

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 112-13

## Facing the Story Behind Our Tears

When Mary turns away from the tomb, having just disclosed the cause of her grief to the angels, she begins another conversation, this time with a man she takes to be the gardener, but who we realize is someone else. Jesus asks Mary the same question as the angels, helping her face the cause of her tears. In the excerpt below, Hudson describes the invitation that accompanies Jesus' question, along with two ways that we can respond:

Jesus' question invites us to face the story behind our tears. Certainly this is what he invited Mary Magdalene to do. He was asking her to examine her pain, to put words to her sorrow, to allow her tears to find their voice. Mary had just disclosed to the angels the cause of her grief. At that point, Jesus asked her, "Why are you crying?" Even though Mary does not recognize Jesus, she responds to his question by expressing her anguish at not finding his body....

Like Mary, we also need to respond to this question. We can find someone with whom we feel safe enough to entrust our tears. We can also share our tears with God. Many of the psalms in the Bible teach us to do this. They show us how to talk simply and honestly to God about the deep groaning of our hearts and lives. We need to tell God about it. The psalmist repeatedly encourages us to speak aloud to God about our painful experiences (“To the Lord I cry aloud”; “Here my prayer, O Lord, listen to my cry for help.”)

Something healing and life-giving happens when we share our tears not just with God but also with another human being. Almost always when we take this step, we experience great relief and release. When we have the courage to do this, we do not feel so alone any more. We feel closer to one another as we become more open to sharing our struggles rather than boasting about our successes. Even more importantly, this sharing can lead us to find a new intimacy in our relationship with God. When we bring our tears to God in the presence of another person, there seems to be response from God that helps us know we are not alone. We may even begin to sense that God shares our broken heart and weeps with us in our pain.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 114-15

## Moving From Tears to New Beginnings

When Mary turns and sees Jesus for the first time, she overlooks his identity, mistaking him to be the gardener. She sees the person of her concern, but does not recognize him. Yet Jesus comes to Mary with great love and gentleness.

Mary's moment of recognition comes when Jesus speaks her name (v. 16). Jesus is the good shepherd who knows his own and calls them by name (John 10:3-4, 14), and Mary is one of the sheep who recognize his voice and know him (10:16, 24).

The fact Jesus was concerned about Mary's tears should tell us that he is concerned about ours as well. Jesus sees our tears and cares deeply for each of us. Jesus' question helps us move from our tears to new beginnings. We need to realize that in our most difficult situations God is working on our behalf even if we do not know it at the time. The good news is not only that Jesus was raised from the tomb, but the character of God is revealed in Jesus. He is light and he is also love.

Perhaps Mary mistaking Jesus as the gardener is John's way of giving us clues on how we might understand what has happened. Two things drive us back to the beginning of John's gospel encouraging us to view this not as the end of the story, but a new beginning.

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God...In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”* (John 1:1-5). The striking words with which John opens his gospel point us back to Genesis 1: *“In the beginning...the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep...God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light”* (1:1-3).

Now John has come to the end of his story, and he reminds us once again of those opening lines of Genesis. For it was *“early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark”* (20:1), that Mary made her way to the tomb. The darkness struggled to overcome the light, but it failed. As light returns to earth, it brings with it new life, the dawn of a new creation.

That tomb from which Jesus emerged—where the light shined again in the darkness, proving that the darkness has not overcome the light—was in a garden. We're back at the beginning again: "*The Lord God planted a garden in Eden in the east and put there the human he had formed*" (Gen 2:8). Why put him in the garden? "*The Lord God settled him in the garden to cultivate it and to take care of it*" (2:15). John wants us to see the connection between the first human and Jesus—the new Adam, the new humanity and new creation. We know that in the first creation story God sent Eve and Adam out of the garden. But in this new creation Jesus sends Mary out of the garden rejoicing.

She has seen her Rabbi, her Teacher, her Lord, and she now understands that she has seen "*the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). "I have seen the Lord!" she announces to the other disciples (John 20:18). Her message declares to us the new beginning that God has prepared for all of us.

**This garden imagery is a powerful reminder that when Jesus meet Mary in her tears, he wanted to bring her the resurrection gift of starting over again.** That is what the risen Christ wants to do for us. In the midst of our tears he wants to help us to begin again, to experience new life and resurrection power. As he did in Mary's life, he comes searching for us in our pain, calling us by name, and inviting us into deeper intimacy.

We don't always recognize him at first. Sometimes he comes to us through a caring friend, sometimes in the beauty of a sunset, sometimes in the bread and cup of a Communion service. In whatever way we may experience his resurrection love and power, when we do, it always helps us to take another step through our suffering.

**As you engage Jesus' question for yourself, allow this garden image to fill your heart and mind. It speaks of new creation, new growth, new possibilities.** Jesus is the new Adam, alive and present throughout the universe, who is making all things new. He is the risen Christ who seeks out each one of us, wanting to plant the seeds of a new future in the soil of our pain. He wants to help us move from our tears to new beginnings. He wants to make resurrection and healing a reality in our experience.

Excerpt from *Questions God Asks Us*, pg. 117-18

## Answering God's Question<sup>1</sup>

"Why are you crying?" Listen to the question coming to you as you stand with Mary weeping in the garden. Behind the question is the voice of the one who searches for you until he finds you, who calls you by name, and who loves you with a love that will never let you go. As you think about your own tears and the pain that you have been through in your own life, know that you are not alone. Take your time with the question, and as your answer begins to take shape in the depth of your heart, share your response with the risen Christ. You could be crying for any number of reasons:

- I'm crying because I am missing my loved one so much.
- I'm crying because my marriage is in trouble, and I cannot see a way forward.
- I'm crying because divorce has ripped my life apart.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *Questions God Asks Us*, pp. 118-20

- I'm crying because I am in the dark and I don't know what to do.
- I'm crying because my body is in pain, and I cannot find relief.
- I'm crying because of the deep guilt I feel for a past action.
- I'm crying because God seems so far away, and I don't know where to find God.

Maybe your pain is locked away so deeply that you don't even know how to express it. You feel sad but don't know why. This may be the time to speak to a trusted friend or counselor.

1. As you stand with Mary in the garden, allow her also to represent all those other people who weep today. Think of someone you know who has cried bitterly recently. It could be someone you know well, someone very close to you; or it could be someone that you have about in the news or seen on television. In your mind bring the person with you into the presence of Jesus who reaches out to every suffering human being. Hold him or her — their tears, their pain, their sorrow — in your mind and heart as you pray. Let your life become the place where a little of the world's pain can be concentrated and held and shared in the presence of God who will one day wipe away all tears from all eyes.
2. As you share the story behind your tears with Christ and hold in your heart the tears of a neighbor, look with Mary into the darkness of the empty tomb. See that the crucified one is no longer there. Let your tears turn into worship as you realize that God has raised Jesus from the dead.

Without resurrection there is no good reason to suppose that you can live beyond your tears. But with the resurrection having taken place, you can weep in the hope that God can lead you beyond your tears toward new beginnings. Without this good news, life makes no sense at all.

## Discussion

1. The angels ask Mary, "Why are you crying?" What answers would this question receive today if it were asked of you, your family, and your friends? In what ways do you identify with Mary weeping outside the tomb?
2. How is Jesus' intimate presence an answer in those situations—as it is in Mary's? How has the presence of Jesus comforted you in the midst of tears?
3. When have you experienced someone sharing your pain and holding your sadness. What qualities did this person have? What did this mean to you?
4. Jesus' resurrection signaled the beginning of God's new creation. For Mary, hearing the voice of Jesus calling her name in the garden began her movement from tears to new beginnings. Share one experience when you have moved through tears to new beginnings. What made this possible?
5. Read Revelation 21:1-5. What do these words mean to you right now? How do you feel when you hear the promise that God "will wipe every tear from [our] eyes," and that "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain" and that God is "making everything new"?