“***Why Are You Weeping?***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Apr. 4 (Easter), 2020

**John 20:1–18**

1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. 2So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” 3Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. 4The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, 7and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. 8Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; 9for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. 10Then the disciples returned to their homes.

11 But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; 12and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. 13They 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.” 14When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” 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.” 16Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). 17Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because 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.’” 18Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

This is a much more personal and Mary-focused version of the Resurrection story than what is seen in Matthew and Luke, where Jesus appears to a *group* of women. It is possible that this appearance to Mary alone came first, and that Jesus later appeared to Mary and the other women. John does not feel the need to repeat everything that is in the other gospels, but supplies some things left out.

All four gospels have a generally male-centered focus, and John shows this by dwelling on John’s and Peter’s reactions to the empty tomb. John and Peter see the cloth and the linen wrapping. When John goes into the tomb, he comes to a spiritual conclusion: “He saw and believed” it says (20:8). The author, probably a disciple of John’s, wants to give John credit for believing in the Resurrection before anyone else did. John gets to be first. Yet, the author is forced to tell the story of who *really* saw Jesus first, and that is Mary.

Mary is by herself, weeping outside the tomb. It is a very emotional time for her. Her teacher has been cruelly murdered; now she arrives at the tomb and finds the stone rolled away and the body not present. Mary looks into the tomb and sees two angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been, and they ask her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She says she is wondering where they put his body. Of course, she is weeping. Not only has her master been foully executed, but now someone might have disrespected the body, as well.

There is a lot of mystery in the story. Peter and John were wondering where the body is, and now Mary is wondering. It is odd how none of them seems to remember Jesus saying that he would be put to death, and would rise on the third day (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:34). But then, they didn’t really want to believe the bad news that the Son of Man would be killed. And they are seriously confused, saddened, and afraid in the interval between the killing and the Resurrection. Their minds are clouded.

Possibly Mary’s is, too. She turns around and sees a man whom she does not recognize. Now, it could be that his resurrection body is a little different from his earthly body, that the face is different. Later, the apostles also don’t recognize him once when he appears to them in Galilee (John 21:4). Mary assumes him to be the gardener. He also asks her why she is weeping, and for whom she is looking. She asks him to let her know if he has taken the body away. It is at this point that Jesus says to her “Mary!” And only then does she recognize him. We usually think about the face when we speak of recognizing someone. But there is something about a familiar voice that plays a big role in recognition. It is only when she hears him say her name that she really *sees* him. The voice, evidently, is the same. And it brings up memories of her conversations with him and of hearing his teaching. The message of God’s love that she is used to hearing, resonates in her mind when she recognizes his voice. She has a very strong spiritual and emotional attachment to her teacher. It may be that he had rescued her from a disreputable career and given her a new life. She had plenty to weep about, whether in sorrow or in gratitude.

When Mary does recognize him, she says “my teacher.” Actually, that word, *Rabbouni*, could be translated more literally as “my muchness.” *Rab* is the word for “much,” or “many,” and it became the common label for a respected teacher.

Jesus instructs her to go to the apostles and say that he will be “ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). When she does speak to them, they don’t respond to the saying she was commanded to give. According to Luke, to the male disciples, “these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them” (Luke 24:11). They show the prejudice that was common in virtually all cultures in those days. Women were not treated as full adults, and the word of women was not taken seriously. But the apostles do eventually come to believe the wonderful news. When Jesus appears to the two on the road to Emmaus, and they report to the apostles, there is no mention of the apostles being skeptical (24:35). After this he appears to the assembled apostles, asking them “why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?” (24:38).

The doubting of the apostles is another mystery, probably a bigger mystery than their doubting Mary and the other women. They should have recalled Jesus’ promise to rise from the dead. But their emotions clouded their thinking.

All four gospels tell us that the women are the first witnesses of the Resurrection, and this fact should have raised the status of women in the Christian community. Probably it did, after the whole story was told. Christians were later criticized for allowing too much freedom to women. That’s a *strong* piece of evidence that women’s status had indeed been raised.

But listen to the content of Jesus’ message. He is going to “my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (20:17). It makes them almost equal to him, in that they are sons of the Father. It makes *their* relationship with God important, since God is *their* Father. He wants them to have a vital, first-hand experience of relationship with God, to be able to say “God is *my* God; the Father is *my* Father.” He knows the Resurrection offers them the hope that they will be resurrected, too.

This story is very personal, and not just for Mary. Each of the apostles’ stories is very personal to them. Jesus wants us *all* to have a very personal relationship with him. We can call on him at any time. He would speak to us each by name, and exhort us to do our best, and to trust his promises. His Father, who is also *our* Father, will take good care of us, and raise us up after our own death. Relationships are emphasized throughout: God’s relationship to all his children, Jesus’ relationship to Mary, the apostles’ relationship to Jesus, the men’s relationships to the women, and the women’s leadership in the emerging church, which is hinted at here. And today, we have many relationship potentials available to us within the Family of God.

The focus on relationships is seen not only in the story about Mary but in the line about “my Father and your Father, my God and your God,” which tends to emphasize Jesus as our brother. He cared for his apostles and for all the disciples, and worried about them. After his Resurrection, he continued to encourage them and to buoy their spirits.

Likewise, be lifted up in your spirits. Rejoice! Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!