

Sermon outline and notes © Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor
Swift Creek Baptist Church (swiftcreek.church)
18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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John 20:11-18 (read vv.11-13) “How to Grieve as a Christian”

Intro. About two months ago I made plans to preach this sermon. Though my dad’s health had taken a turn for the worse, I did not know at the time that I would be preaching this sermon a little over two weeks after his death. You see, on May 4 my dad went home to be with the Lord. In fact, the day before he died he said, “I want to go home.” The morning he died my brother asked him to squeeze his hand if he was ready to go see Jesus. He then squeezed his hand. As I witnessed his faith as he faced death, I can testify to you that I received great comfort from the Lord. Knowing that I will see him again helped to ease the grief.

I am speaking to many today who have lost loved ones, some in just the past year or two. In the past two years we have lost 23 members of our church to death, probably the most ever in a two-year period. I am speaking to some who have known the grief of losing a child, a spouse, a parent, a brother or sister, or a grandparent. And so this morning I am going to focus on the grief that Mary Magdalene was experiencing at the tomb of Jesus. I believe we can discover some principles that will help us to grieve as a Christian ought to grieve.

While there is nothing wrong with experiencing sadness and tears at the passing of a loved one, prolonged grief can lead to all sorts of problems. These include physical problems, including headaches, loss of appetite, difficulty sleeping, fatigue, bodily aches and pains, and other stress-related ailments. It can lead to emotional symptoms like anger, guilt, anxiety and depression. Grief can cause a person to withdraw socially. Grief can lead to spiritual problems, including questioning our faith in God.¹ Yet the apostle Paul says in 1 Thess. 4:13 that he wants us to be informed of our Christian hope “so that you will not grieve like the rest, who have no hope” (HCSB). Yes, our faith in Christ and our Christian hope makes a big difference when a Christian loved one passes away.

How, then, should a Christian grieve? First of all:

I. SHED TEARS FOR YOUR LOVED ONE

We see in our story that Mary Magdalene certainly did. Peter and John had come to the tomb, but were long gone at this point in the story. But v.10 indicates that Mary stayed at the tomb where Jesus had been laid. The Greek text indicates that she was involved in ongoing, unrestrained sobbing (present tense of *klaio*).

Now from the tears of Mary I see that tears of grief and sorrow are normal. In v.11 we read that Mary decided to look again into the sepulcher. This time she saw what appeared to her to be two men² (Mk. 16:5). Yet we know they were angels who asked, “Woman, why are you weeping?” If you have lost a close loved one in death, you know why she was crying. What made her grief so great was that not only had her Lord died, but His body was missing (v.2). She could

¹ Most of the symptoms listed here are from webmd.com.

² Their number indicated a testimony from on High. Furthermore, v. 12 also says of the two angels that they were “one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain.” Who can doubt that the Holy Spirit would have us link up this verse with Exodus 25:17-19-“And thou shalt make a mercy-seat of pure gold...and thou shalt make two cherubims of gold...[at] two ends of the mercy-seat.” “And there I will meet with thee. (Ex. 25:22). Christ is the true meeting-place between God and man! [Pink].

not understand what had happened. She had come that early morning hour ready to finish the task of anointing His body, only to be disappointed, frustrated, panicked, and lonely.

God gave us tears for a reason. If you pull your lower eyelid down you can see the tear duct that God gave you. Tears provide an emotional release at times of grief and sorrow. That's because emotional tears contain higher levels of stress hormones than lubricating tears, and so crying is a way to remove those harmful stress hormones from your body! (webmd.com). So that is one reason we actually feel better after we shed tears. And we should remember how we should minister to those who shed tears of grief. Romans 12:15 says that we should "...weep with those who weep."

Tears of grief are perfectly fine when they are an expression of love for the love one you have lost. This was certainly true of Mary. Oh, how she loved Jesus. This Mary had more reason to love Jesus. He had done so much for her. He had saved her from so vile a life. And how intensely she loved may be gathered from her refusal to leave until she found the body of Jesus. The disciples went away, but Mary lingered. And later in v.15 we will read of Jesus asking her, "Whom are you seeking?" She did not recognize Him at first through her tearful eyes, and supposed that He was the gardener. So she said, "Sir, if You have carried Him away, tell me where You have laid Him, and I will take Him away." In love and sacrifice she is saying in effect, "I will find a place where I can bury Him if you have to have this tomb back so soon." She was mistaken as to *where* to find Jesus, but not mistaken about her desire that she *must* find Him. Mary exemplifies the case of those whose hearts seek Christ.

All of us have had tears of grief and sorrow. Aren't you glad that the day is coming when there will be no more tears? Rev. 21:4 says, "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying..." When the curse of sin entered the world God gave us tears to help us cope. But when the curse of sin is removed, we will no longer have a need for tears. There will only be unending joy and happiness.

So while it is certainly normal to shed tears over the passing of a loved one, the second truth I want to share is this:

II. AVOID THE WRONG KIND OF GRIEF

If something did not change, I believe that Mary could have become overwhelmed with grief. The more you love someone, the deeper the grief can be, especially apart from our Christian hope. There are two kinds of grief that we should seek to avoid:

A. Self-absorbing Grief - We must be careful not to allow ourselves to be completely overcome with grief. There is nothing more self-absorbing than great grief. Grief overwhelms us when we focus primarily upon our own loss, rather than upon what our departed loved one has gained (Php. 1:21).

I think we see this in Mary. Look at vv.12-13, "And she saw two angels in white sitting, one at the head and the other at the feet, where the body of Jesus had lain. Then they said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid Him.'" She was so grief-stricken that she did not even recognize the angels for who they were, in spite of their white clothing. She was mainly focused on her own loss, and paid little attention to anything or anyone else. She was so full of grief she didn't even recognize Jesus in the next verse.

Even so, grief can so focus on personal loss that it fails to recognize the angels that God may send to us. If your eyes are only on yourself, and your own loss, you have succumbed to self-

absorbing grief.

B. Grief that Expresses Unbelief – Again, the angels asked her in v.13, “Woman, why are you weeping?” This was a gentle inquiry, made for the purpose of stirring her mind. Have you just cause for those tears? Implied in their statement is that this is actually not the time for weeping. Search your heart, Mary! Doesn’t the fact that Christ is not here give you ground for rejoicing? Don’t you remember that Christ told you He would rise from the dead? She was weeping because she had failed to believe the promise of Christ concerning the resurrection. She should have been rejoicing at the sight of the empty tomb, not weeping!

Furthermore, the one word “supposing” in v.15 explains all her sorrow. Even after seeing Jesus she was “supposing Him to be the gardener....” Many Christians today are miserable because they “suppose” something that is not at all true. It was for an absent Lord that she was weeping, yet it was on that absence that our Christian faith is built. If she had found the body of Jesus, she thinks she would have been happy, but that would have meant no resurrection, no sending of the Spirit, no gospel, no heaven. She had the most glorious kind of love, but weak faith.

Jacob also illustrates the fact that so often our fears and our tears are groundless, and are evidences of our unbelief. He had been told that Joseph had been torn and killed by a lion. Supposing the worst, he was overcome with grief. Years later, there was a famine in the land. He sent his sons down to Egypt to buy grain. But they returned without Simeon, who was being held there until they brought Benjamin to Egypt. When the food had run out, and it was time to buy more, the brothers insisted that they had to take Benjamin with them. Jacob thought he had lost Joseph and Simeon. Now, he feared losing his youngest son Benjamin. To which Jacob replied, “All these things against me.” Joseph was the one who later pointed out that God was working through the circumstances to provide food, and save lives. All things were not against him, but God was working all things for his good! Jacob lived to see Joseph again, rich and prosperous, and to thank God for all that had happened. As it turns out, none of his sons were lost. All were restored to him!

Are you fearful as you face the future? Are you tearful as you face what appear to be losses in your life? Listen to God’s Spirit as He asks, “Why do you weep? Why are you afraid, when God is a loving Father, who will work all things for your good” (Rom. 8:28). Trust Him, and the fears and the tears will go away. God has also promised us eternal life. We can see our loved ones again. Jesus has promised that He will return for us someday. Faith in the promises of eternal life and the resurrection should cause us to sorrow much less than others.

Let me share another truth that should help you.

III. IN YOUR GRIEF REMEMBER THAT GOD LOVES YOU

Mary was so grieved at the death of Jesus and her own personal loss. At times like that you may doubt that God loves you, for He did not intervene to prevent the loss of your loved one. But in this text I see affirmations of the love of Jesus for each of us. First of all:

A. Jesus Appeared to Mary – He did so beginning in v.14. In doing so, He honored her loving devotion. We have already discussed the fact that Mary loved Jesus more than most of His followers. As a result, she was blessed above the others in a number of ways. She saw the angels whom Peter and John had not observed. She heard them speak. She was the first to see our Lord after He had risen from the dead. Jesus had other reasons for appearing the Mary first that we shall

discuss later. But I believe that He also appeared to her because He would not leave such a loving disciple in such sorrow. He desired to turn her sorrow into joy.

I believe the same thing is true today. God loves you, and when you go through a personal loss, He will seek to comfort you, and minister to you.

B. Jesus Loves Us Individually – Here we see Jesus manifest a living, loving relationship with one of His people. Notice that Jesus revealed Himself to her by calling her by name, “Mary.” As soon as He spoke her name, she recognized that it was Jesus!

Dear friend, God knows you by name, though there are over 7 billion people on this planet! Ex. 33:12 says, “I know you by name, and you have also found grace in My sight.” John 10:3 says, “and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.” Isa. 43:1 says, “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by your name; You are Mine.” Did you know that Jesus knows your name? Not only that, but the Lord knows the number of hairs on your head (Mt. 10:30), and for some of us, counting the number of hairs is not so difficult! He loves you in a personal way. We are not just a part of a religious system. We do not have an indifferent Savior, or a cold, calculating Christ; we have a warm, intimate, loving Savior.

Someone has said:

“If God had a refrigerator, your picture would be on it.

If He had a wallet, your photo would be in it.

He sends you flowers every spring and a sunrise every morning.

Whenever you want to talk, He listens.

Face it, friend—He loves you! God didn’t promise days without pain, laughter without sorrow, and sun without rain, but He did promise strength for the day, comfort for the tears, and light for the way.” He has promised that after the darkest night, there will be the dawn of a new day.

When Mary heard her name from the lips of Jesus, she immediately recognized Him and called Him “Rabboni,” an Aramaic word for a great and respected teacher in Israel. When you love someone, and you hear that someone speak your name, you know who it is. Will you hear God call your name this morning when He calls upon you to believe in His Son Jesus?

But Mary’s exclamation was imperfect in that it expressed the resumption of no more than the old bond, and her gladness needed enlightenment. Things were not to be as they had been. So we see next of all:

IV. IN YOUR GRIEF SEEK TO WALK BY FAITH

Jesus said to Mary in v.17, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father....” He did not merely say, “Don’t touch me.” Others were invited to touch Him, especially Thomas. An even better translation would be, “Stop clinging to Me.” Mary must have grabbed hold of the feet and legs of Jesus. It was as if she were saying, “Lord, I lost you once, and I never want to lose you again.” It is hard to let a loved one go when God calls them home to heaven. So Mary wanted to hang on to the physical presence of Jesus, but this can’t happen because He says, “...I ascend unto My Father....”³ He is saying here, “Mary, our mode of fellowship is not going to be like it was. Things are all different now. The former life will not be resumed. When I go to the Father, I will send the Spirit. When that happens, I won’t be with you physically, but I’ll be in you spiritually. That must have been a bitter disappointment to Mary. The one thing she wanted was to

³ First He says, “I have not yet ascended” (perfect tense). Then He says, “I am ascending” (present tense).

be with Christ, yet that was the one thing He denied her. 2 Cor. 5:16 describes this new relationship with Christ, not based on the physical but on the spiritual. Paul wrote, "Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer." Those who had Christ in the flesh must now learn to live by faith, not by sight.

Even so, we must walk by faith, not by sight. Though we do not see Jesus, we can experience His presence in our lives by the Holy Spirit. As Jesus was about to ascend into heaven, He promised His disciples, "...and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mt. 28:20). Though your loved one has left, Jesus has promised to remain with you.

Finally, as we think about grieving as a Christian, the last truth I want to share is this:

V. TURN FROM FOCUSING ON YOUR LOSS TO MINISTERING TO OTHERS

As I have already noted, the wrong response is to turn inward and focus on yourself, including your own great losses. Instead, you will feel a whole lot better if you turn your attention to helping others. In the last of v.17 Jesus said to Mary, "...go to My brethren and say to them, 'I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God.'" Mary's meeting with Christ made her a missionary!

Likewise, those who know Christ and believe in Christ and love Christ are commissioned to go and tell others about Jesus. However bright and happy Mary might be with Christ, that would not help Peter and James and John and the other disciples. They were all sorrowing, for they were all doubting. Surely, Mary must not be selfish; she has seen the Lord, so she must remember that others have not seen Him; and she is therefore commanded to go and deliver to them a message from Christ.

I preached this message about 14 years ago, shortly after Kevin Doughty died from cancer. His widow Phyllis was in the early service that day and heard this message. We had communion that Sunday and we were about to sing, "Bless Be the Tie that Binds." I noticed Phyllis left her seat and I thought she was leaving to grieve. Instead, she walked over to someone who was by himself. She went to invite him to join hands with her and others. It's amazing how much better we will feel when we focus on others instead of our own losses.

I want you to observe with me the kind of witness she was to be. We should be prepared to witness of the same truths. First of all:

A. Witness of a New Relationship – In the last of v.17 Jesus calls His disciples "brethren." Imagine that! The ascended, exalted Christ is our Brother, though He sits on the throne! Here is something exciting, thrilling, and new: a whole new relationship to Christ. Here He puts His followers on the same level as He Himself! He also says in v.17, "...I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God."

How can we be the brothers of Christ? First of all, His nature in heaven is our nature. God the Son took on human flesh, and became our brother. Furthermore, Heb. 2:11 says, "...He is not ashamed to call them brethren." And why is He not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters? When you and I receive Christ, His righteousness is imputed to us. Our sins have been washed away. Positionally, we become as righteous as Christ! God loves us as He loves Christ! Eph. 1:6-7 says, "... He has made us accepted in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."

B. Witness to the Lord's Forgiveness – I see that in that same word by which Jesus

addressed the disciples, “brethren.” Remember, Peter had denied Jesus. All fled from Him in the garden. Only John ultimately followed Him all the way to the cross. In spite of all their sin and unfaithfulness, Jesus still called them brethren. It is interesting that according to Mark’s gospel, Mary and the other women were told, “But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee” (Mark 16:7).

Friend, God loves you, and He is more than willing to forgive all your sins! Let us witness to others of the Lord’s forgiveness.

C. Witness of His Resurrection - They all thought that He was dead. They thought His body had been taken away. But Mary was to go and tell them the good news that Jesus is alive, and will soon ascend to heaven.⁴ Sure enough, we read in v.18, “Mary Magdalene came and told the disciples that she had seen the Lord, and that He had spoken these things to her.” She is saying in essence, “I have seen the Lord, and I want to share Him with you.” Perhaps Jesus specifically mentioned the ascension because He had said to them in John 16:7 “...It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you.” He would have them understand that His resurrection was only a step toward His return unto the Father. He had not left the grave simply to remain with them here on earth, but in order to enter Heaven as their Forerunner, and to send the Holy Spirit in His place.

Jesus sent her out to tell what she had seen and heard. And the same commission is given to us today. We are to tell others what we have experienced as we have come to know Christ. We are to be able to tell firsthand of our experience, not second-hand reports of what *others* have said. Relate your own experience, and tell the gospel, too, to all with whom you come into contact.

Conclusion: Mary wanted to stay with Jesus, and hold on to Jesus. But Jesus sent her forth to bear witness of Him. Even so, we can’t stay with Christ all the time in worship and fellowship. We must go out to serve Him by being a witness for Him.

There is a Roman Catholic legend of a certain monk in a monastery, and on a certain occasion, he had a vision of the Lord Jesus. But just as he was looking with rapture upon his Lord, the bell sounded, and it was his duty to go to the gate of the monastery to feed the poor who had gathered there. He wanted to stay and continue the experience of the vision, but he fulfilled his duty and went out to minister to the poor. After doing so, he came back, a bit dejected because the vision had been abruptly ended. But as he returned to his place in the monastery, the vision of Christ was renewed, and the monk reported that Christ said to him, “If you had stayed, and not ministered to the poor, I would not have appeared to you again.” [Told by Spurgeon]. Whether this story actually happened, I do not know. But it does illustrate the truth of our text that Mary learned. May we commit ourselves to going forth from this place to minister to those who need Christ.

I spoke earlier of the love of Mary for Jesus. Here we see another evidence of her true love. She was obedient to Christ. She would have preferred to cling to Him, and stay with Him, but she obeyed Jesus, and went and told the disciples what she had seen and heard. Jesus had said in John 14:15, “If you love Me, keep My commandments.” Will you obey Jesus today? If He calls upon you to make a public profession of faith, will you do it? If He calls upon you to rededicate your life to Him, will you do it? If He calls upon you to join this church, will you do it? If He calls you to go and share Christ with someone, will you do it? If you truly love Jesus as Mary did, you will!

⁴ As by a woman came the first message of death, so by a woman came also the first notice of the resurrection from the dead [Pink].

Sources: William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1955); John MacArthur, Jr., *Crucifixion & Resurrection: Study Notes on John 18-20* (Panorama City, CA: Word of Grace Communications, 1986); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); George Morrison (notes from his sermon on this text, Kregel Publications); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 4:23] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2012); Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975); Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 389-396; Warren W. Wiersbe, *"Be" Series: New Testament Volumes 1 & 2, John* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1989). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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