

5:45am Sermon: Grace in the Wilderness

Year A, Easter

[Jeremiah 31:1-6](#); [Psalm 118:1-2,14-24](#); [Colossians 3:1-4](#); [John 20:1-18](#)

Offered April 16, 2017 to Brookline Community Church, Brookline, NH

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Mary is standing outside the empty tomb weeping. And how could she not weep. She got up before it was light and went to take care of her teacher, to wash and anoint his body as was proper. Like all of us, she knew that there would be a last time to be in contact with his body, and that after that, the real searing pain of letting go would begin. When she got there, the tomb had been disturbed, the stone rolled back, the body gone. Of course she is weeping.

She is a woman of her community. She knows the stories, has heard them on her own, and has heard her beloved teacher tell them. Of the flight from slavery in Egypt. Of the journey through the wilderness to Sinai. More time in the wilderness. Then the arrival in the land of milk and honey. Once in the land of Canaan, her people drifted away from their God, until the enemies came and came. And still the people did not repent. Until the last enemy came and sent them into exile in Babylon. They were eventually allowed to return, passing through the wilderness yet again, to return to the land that their God had given them. No longer an independent country, they were at least reunited with each other and with the land. Then the Greeks took over, to be replaced by the Romans.

Throughout all that history, the people of Israel had strayed away from God, they broke their covenants with God again and again. And yet, again and again, God said *I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people.* (Jeremiah 31:1). Again and again, God said *I have loved you with an everlasting love* (Jeremiah 31:3). God had loved them with an everlasting love and God had sent his son, Jesus, to them as the Messiah. For all the times God's love sprung up unexpectedly in the wilderness, when Israel most needed it, how could God's people expect God to continue in faithfulness, when the people had killed the Messiah and lost his body without giving him proper burial? No wonder Mary is weeping.

She is standing in a garden as she weeps. But it must feel like the wilderness, a place inhospitable to a vulnerable human body, a place with no discernible order. We have all been in the wilderness and wept. Our plans went awry. We betrayed someone we loved or they betrayed us. The child we expected didn't make it to term. The job we were sure to get fell through or the career we planned on fell apart. Most of the times we just put our heads down and kept going. But sometimes, the shock was so ferocious that we picked our heads up and saw the wilderness around us. Even if we were standing in our own living rooms.

Many of you came through the wilderness while it was still dark (John 20:1) and felt something different. I have a friend who goes for long walks in the woods when her life gets too tangled. She says she walks until she feels her insides match the world outside her, until the chaos and confusion inside stop fighting to find some kind of unnatural order and settle to where they're supposed to be. The wilderness is like that. It's not tidy rows of vines, or well tended plantings waiting to have their fruit harvested (Jeremiah 31:5), but it's the way it's supposed to be when trees come up and fall down, when creatures move through and the seasons rotate in their turns. Things compose and decompose the way their supposed to. For many of us, it's easier to believe in God's everlasting love in the wilderness than in the settled spaces of humanity.

Mary is weeping in the garden, not expecting anything, except, perhaps, more violence to descend on her already fragmenting community. And Jesus calls her by name, "Mary." She recognizes him, crying out "Rabbouni". He tells her not to touch him, but comforts her by saying that he will ascend to his God and her God, as she will do in her turn. Jesus is there for her, in bodily form, assuring her that it is still true that the people who survived the sword find grace in the wilderness (Jeremiah 31:2). God still loves us all, with an everlasting love. God still builds us as we build God's kingdom in this world. God still calls all of us by name, remaining in personal relationship with all of us. God still appears from far away, whether we are in the wilderness or in well tended gardens. There is no where God's love does not reach, including into and beyond the grave. There is grace in the wilderness for everyone at all times.