

When Jesus Shows Up, Grief Becomes Joy

John 20:11–18

Big Idea: Jesus meets us personally in our deepest pain.

OUR SHARED GRIEF

Grief is part of the human condition.

And whether it comes suddenly or slowly...whether through loss, disappointment, or things not turning out the way we thought they would...you don't have to go looking for it.

It will come looking for you. It gets us all.

Across cultures, across generations, across time, people have always had to wrestle with it. Anthropologists point out that every culture has developed rituals around grief—moments of silence, loud expressions of mourning, communal gatherings, even seasons of withdrawal. And the reason is simple:

Grief disorients us.

1 | Grief doesn't just break your heart—it can blind your eyes.

When people are grieving, they often experience a narrowing of vision. What once made sense no longer does. What once brought clarity now feels confusing. And perhaps most significantly, grief reshapes our expectations. We begin to assume absence. We begin to anticipate loss. We brace ourselves for disappointment.

And if we're not careful, grief doesn't just shape how we see our circumstances—it begins to shape how we see God.

We may not say it out loud, but internally we begin to ask questions like, "Where was God?" or "Why didn't God show up?" or "Why didn't He do something?" And slowly, subtly, grief forms a lens through which we interpret reality—including God's presence.

And here's the danger of grief:

It is possible to be near God... and feel abandoned. To be surrounded by His presence... and assume His absence.

And that kind of grief—grief without clarity, grief without hope, grief without encounter—doesn't just hurt...it leaves you lost.

This is important, because when we come to John 20:11–18, we are not just reading about a historical moment. We are stepping into a deeply human moment. A moment where grief has taken hold of someone so deeply that even when Jesus is standing right in front of her, she cannot recognize Him.

Let's read this intimate moment of grief from John 20:11–18.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

WEEPING OUTSIDE THE TOMB (John 20:11–15)

The text tells us that Mary stood outside the tomb crying. This is not composed grief. This is ongoing, active sorrow. She is weeping as she looks into the tomb—and what she sees only deepens the confusion.

The one who changed her life...the one she followed...the one she watched die...is now missing.

When the angels ask her, "*Why are you crying?*" her answer reveals the whole framework she's operating in: "*They have taken my Lord away... and I don't know where they have put him.*"

Notice what grief has done. It hasn't just broken her heart—it has **narrowed her imagination**. The only explanation she can see is loss upon loss.

She is so fixed on what she believes has happened... that even standing in front of two angels doesn't interrupt it. And then it gets even more striking.

Jesus Himself stands before her. He asks, "*Why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?*" And she still doesn't recognize Him or his voice. She thinks He's the gardener. This is one of the most sobering moments in the passage:

Mary is not far from Jesus. She is standing **right in front of Him**...and still cannot see Him for who He is. Not because Jesus is hiding—but because grief is shaping what she expects to see.

And this is where this meets us.

Because the danger of grief is not just that it hurts. The danger is that **it starts to interpret reality for us**. It begins to tell you:

- “God didn’t come through.”
- “This is how the story ends.”
- “Nothing good can come from this.”

And if we’re not careful, grief doesn’t just make us sad—it makes us **certain**. Certain that God is absent. Certain that hope is gone. Certain that resurrection is no longer possible.

And you can be sincere...you can love Jesus...you can be looking for Him...and still miss Him—because you’re only looking for what your pain has prepared you to see.

Mary came looking for Jesus—but she came looking for a **dead Jesus**.

And when your expectation is shaped by loss, you can stand in front of resurrection...and still call it something else. Because grief doesn’t just make you cry—it can quietly convince you that God is no longer at work.

JESUS CALLS US BY NAME (John 20:16)

What is so moving about this interaction is that the entire passage turns on one word.

Jesus said to her, “*Mary*.”

Not a long explanation. Not a theological breakdown. Not a visible display of power. Just her name. You see, many saw the risen Jesus...but Mary heard her name.

And if we’re honest, we know something about this kind of moment. There are seasons in life where everything feels disoriented—where grief, disappointment, or confusion settles in so deeply that you can’t even see clearly anymore. You can be looking right at something and still not recognize it. You can be surrounded by truth and still feel completely lost. That’s where Mary is. She’s not just grieving—she’s *disoriented*. She says, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” Everything in her world feels misplaced, like something has been taken and she can’t find it again. Have you ever been there?

And what’s so striking is that she thinks Jesus is the one who is lost. She’s searching, trying to locate Him, trying to make sense of where He’s gone. But the deeper reality of the moment is that Mary is the one who cannot see. She’s the one who cannot recognize. She’s the one who, in her grief, needs to be found.

Up to this point, she has seen the empty tomb. She has heard the angels. She has even spoken directly to Jesus. But none of those things brought recognition. Because the turning point was not visual—it was personal.

2 | In our grief, Jesus makes Himself known—and reorients everything.

Jesus says her name. “Mary.”

And in that moment, everything shifts. Because she doesn’t just hear a word—she hears a voice she knows. A voice that had once called her out of darkness. A voice that had once restored her life. And through the fog of grief, recognition breaks through—not because she suddenly sees more clearly, but because she is known.

“Mary,” and her confusion turns to clarity. “Mary,” and her sorrow begins to crack open into joy. “Mary,” and the one she thought was gone is suddenly present.

She was looking for a body... but some-body was looking for her.

And this is what the resurrection reveals. The resurrection is not only something to be seen or even processed as information—it is something to be heard. Because faith doesn’t ultimately come from seeing everything clearly, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God who calls and knows us personally.

And this isn’t new to the heart of God. In Isaiah 43:1, God speaks to His people and says, *“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.”*

That’s the language of rescue.

That’s the language of belonging.

That’s the language of a God who does not deal with people in generalities—but personally.

“I have called you by name... you are mine.” And what we see in the garden is that same God, now in the flesh, continuing that same mission. As Jesus says in John 10:3, *“He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.”* And in John 20, that promise is no longer just taught—it’s happening in real time.

“Mary.”

Jesus is not distant or impersonal. He is not interacting with Mary as part of a crowd. He is coming after her, calling her, finding her. Because when Jesus calls your name, He is not just identifying you—He is claiming you.

He is reorienting you. He is pulling you out of confusion, out of grief, out of that place where everything feels lost...and bringing you back into relationship.

“I have called you by name... you are mine.”

And in that moment in the garden, Mary realizes—that promise wasn’t just for Israel...

It was for her. Mary thought she had lost Jesus. But in reality, Jesus was the one who found her.

JESUS IS PERSONAL, PRESENT, COMPASSIONATE

3 | In our deepest grief, Jesus reveals Himself as personal, present, and compassionate.

First, He reveals that He is personal.

He knows her name. He does not address her as a stranger or as part of a group. He engages her directly, intentionally. And this is part of what makes the Christian faith so distinct and so beautiful—it is not merely about finding God, it is about a God who makes Himself known and comes looking for people.

Luke 19:10, *“The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”* That is not abstract theology—that is personal pursuit.

And what we see with Mary is that this same Jesus is still doing that post-resurrection. He is alive, and He is still revealing Himself to people, still calling people by name, still making Himself known.

One of my favorite questions to ask our new visitors—and there are so many of you, welcome to Light & Life, we really do hope you’ve felt a genuine love here—I love asking, *“How did you find our church?”*

And the answers are all over the place.

“Google.”

“A friend invited me.”

“I’ve driven by for years, but something just told me to come.”

“I found a flyer in my gym locker room.”

And on the surface, those all sound like different stories. But underneath them, it’s actually the same story. Jesus is drawing people.

John 6:44 says, *“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them...”*

Which means behind every invite, every sign, every random moment that got your attention—there is a personal God, pursuing you, calling you, drawing you to Himself.

Jesus is still in the business of revealing Himself—not just in theory, not just in history—but in real lives, in real moments, in unmistakably personal ways.

Second, He reveals that He is present.

He was there the entire time.

Even when Mary did not recognize Him.

Even when she assumed He was someone else.

Even when her grief shaped her perception of reality—He was still there.

And this is part of what makes this moment so powerful. Mary’s experience of Jesus did not begin when she recognized Him. Jesus’ presence preceded her awareness. Which means the same is true for us.

There are moments in our lives where we assume God is absent. Where everything feels silent. Where our circumstances don’t line up with what we believe about Him. But the resurrection

reminds us that His presence is not dependent on our perception. He is there—even when we cannot see Him clearly.

I remember a few years ago walking through a really painful memory from my childhood. I had come home one night and was locked out. I couldn't find my family. I didn't know where to go. In that moment, it felt like I had been abandoned. My world caved in. Fear set in. Tears started coming.

And as I was processing that years later, I found myself in Psalm 139. And it was like the Lord spoke directly into that moment from my past.

“You hem me in behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me... Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?”

And what hit me was this: even in one of the most painful moments of my life—when I felt completely alone—I wasn't. God was there. I just didn't have the awareness yet to recognize Him. But he was still there.

And that's what this moment with Mary shows us. Jesus was present before she perceived Him. And the same is true for you.

There is nowhere you can go where He is not. No moment too dark. No grief too deep. He is present—even before you recognize Him.

Third, He reveals that He is compassionate.

He does not rebuke her for her tears.

He does not correct her harshly for her misunderstanding.

He meets her exactly where she is.

He asks, *“Why are you crying?”*—not as a dismissal, but as an invitation. An invitation to bring her grief into His presence.

And this matters, because it shows us something essential about the heart of Jesus. He does not wait for us to move past our pain before He engages us. He meets us within it. He steps into the very place where our vision is clouded, where our expectations are broken, where our understanding is limited.

Mary's recognition of Jesus did not happen after she stopped crying. It happened in the middle of her grief.

And that's the beauty of the gospel.

Not that we find our way to God once we've figured everything out...

but that God comes to us, while we are still searching, still confused, still grieving—and makes Himself known.

As Paul says in Romans 5:8, *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Not after we got it together. Not after we saw clearly. While we were still in it.

And what we see in the garden is that the resurrection is not just proof that Jesus is alive.

It is proof that He is still personal.

Still present.

Still compassionate.

Still finding people who think they've lost Him...only to discover that He was the one coming after them all along.

GRIEF TURNS TO JOY (John 20:17–18)

There's something about being the first to share good news. You ever notice that?

When something big happens—an engagement, a pregnancy, a breakthrough, a job offer—there's this instinct in us to tell someone. And not just tell someone... but to be the first to tell them.

“Hey, I've got something to tell you...” “I wanted you to hear it from me...”

And there's a kind of joy in that. Not just in the news itself—but in being the one who gets to carry it.

Now... let's be honest for a second—there's a fine line here.

Because sometimes what we call “sharing news”... is just sanctified chisme.

You're like, “I just want to keep you in prayer...”

No, you don't—you want to keep them informed.

And some of you are very anointed in that ministry. You've got the gift of awareness. You know everything that's happening, before it even happens.

But here's the difference. Gossip shares news that diminishes people. The gospel shares news that restores people. Gossip spreads what's broken. The gospel announces what God has made whole.

4 | When Jesus meets us in our grief, He turns our sorrow into a message.

And that's exactly what happens with Mary.

The moment she recognizes Jesus, everything changes. Her grief is interrupted, her world is reoriented—and what does Jesus do?

He sends her. “Go to my brothers...” And she goes. John 20:18 says, “*Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord.’*” And you can almost feel it—this isn't reluctant obedience. This is joy in motion.

Matthew tells us they ran with **fear and great joy** to tell the others. Because when you've encountered the risen Jesus...you don't just sit in it. You share it. After Jesus reveals Himself, everything begins to shift.

Mary, who came to the tomb weeping, now leaves with a message. The one who was searching is now sent. The one who was grieving is now proclaiming. The text tells us that Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!”

And here’s the question for us— If Jesus has called your name... who is He sending you to?

Because the same voice that calls you out of grief... sends you back into the world. There are people in your life right now who are still standing outside their own tombs...weeping... confused... looking for hope...And they don’t need your advice—they need your witness.

“I have seen the Lord.” And that witness turns into incredible joy for us. [expound]

JESUS SEES & KNOWS YOUR NAME

This passage invites us to see ourselves in Mary’s experience.

Some of us are here today carrying grief—whether it is the loss of a person, the loss of a season, the loss of an expectation, or the weight of unanswered questions. And if we are honest, that grief may be shaping how we see God.

We may be assuming His absence. We may be expecting silence. We may be interpreting our circumstances as evidence that He is not present. But this passage challenges that assumption.

Mary thought Jesus was gone. He was not. Mary thought she was alone. She was not. Mary thought the story was over. It was not. Jesus was present, even when she could not recognize Him. And the same is true for us.

Jesus is not distant from your pain. Psalm 34:18, “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.” He is not waiting for you to resolve your grief before He engages you. He meets you in it. He sees you. He knows you.

And just as He called Mary by name, He still calls people by name today. Not in a general sense, but personally.

He knows your story. He knows your questions. He knows the places where your vision has been clouded by grief. And He is able to reveal Himself, not just as a concept, but as a present and personal Savior. ***My prayer for you today is that each of you would hear the voice of the Lord calling your name. Reminding you that he’s right there with you, before and behind.***

So we return to the truth at the center of this passage:

When Jesus shows up... grief becomes joy.

Not because circumstances immediately change, but because His presence changes how we see everything.

He is personal.

He is present.

He is compassionate.

And when He calls your name, recognition begins to break through even the deepest grief.

If you find yourself identifying with Mary—grieving, searching, unsure, or even struggling to recognize where God is in your life—this moment is an invitation. Not to have everything figured out, but to respond.

Because the same Jesus who met Mary in the garden is still present. And He is still calling people by name.

And when He shows up... grief becomes joy.