

“Gardener of a New Creation”

John 20:1-28, Psalm 25:4-8, Acts 9:1-9

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“...that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:31

We have lived through a year where it has looked and felt like the light of the world has gone out. One war entered its third year with no end in sight; while in the fall, we all became witnesses to daily images of horrors in Israel and Gaza. Slaughter exchanged for security. There aren't enough tombs to bury the dead. Still violence is not far away. In 2023 we beheld over 565 mass shootings in every kind of town and community imaginable. Still, so much violence few ever see. Many carry invisible wounds unseen, unspoken; grief borne alone. We don't all pay the same price. At the end of 2023, 155 mm artillery shells that sold for \$500, then \$2,000, now sell for \$9,000 a pop and, forecasts were made to ramp up production into 2026 by 500%. These are weapons the US doesn't even use itself but sells in proxy wars. Some are profiting. Who?

Are we profiting from all this violence?

The modern prophet Martin Luther King Jr. wrote more than speeches. He created a whole philosophy around violence and the non-violent way of Jesus. King argues that violence does not just injure the enemy, it cuts both ways—also injuring self. To resist violence in the face of violence is not simply love of the enemy, King believes nonviolence arises from a more sober, grounding love of self. To use the same weapons of an enemy to defeat them, costs us everything—it indelibly harms our soul. Those trained to extinguish the enemy also carry the violence and invisible wounding done to their soul and psyche. We mask the horrors borne with emblems of valor, token tributes and discounts. Yet, we can easily discount their pain.

Another uncounted cost in conflict are survivors. They carry in their bodies invisible wounds of violence witnessed, violence they could not stop. Mary Magdalene is one of these witnesses. In John's Gospel, she and the other women—like so many woman—remain at the cross of execution, inhabiting unsafe spaces. While it is still dark, she approaches the garden to access his tomb. We too, approach though it is still dark. For Mary, the approach means passing by the site of his torture and murder. Smells and sounds flood her being. Her heart accelerates even as all remains silent and still. It's the stillness she no longer trusts. There is no peace.

Yet, she cannot deny there is a piece of her that needs to be near his beaten body. To draw close in spite of the pain and allow her mind a moment to catch up with the

horrors her body has witnessed and endured. There was no time. Everything happened so fast. Entering the garden, it all floods back.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb

and saw that the stone was moved away from the entrance (John 20:1).

There is no comfort here. She is robbed even of his battered body. Everything in her has to move ... and so she runs.

She ran at once to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, *gasping for breath*.

“They took the Master from the tomb.

We don’t know where they’ve put him.”

Peter and the other disciple left immediately for the tomb (John 20:2-3).

Even they don’t see her. At word his body is taken, they run to see for themselves. Awash in new horrors, I imagine her stumbling back to the garden alone, accompanied only by fresh bewilderment and sorrow. By the time she arrives again, the two disciples are long gone. She remains alone. Standing outside the tomb she wept (John 20:11) remembering Jesus wept too for his friend Lazarus. Somehow, Jesus was with her in her weeping. And so “she knelt to look in the tomb.” Strangers were where his body would have been. “Woman, why do you weep?” I weep because it is the only human thing to do ... “They took my Lord, and I don’t know where they have put him.” Turning away, as so many have turned away from her in her grief, she encounters the gardener.

“Woman, why do you weep?

Who are you looking for?”

She, thinking that he the gardener, said,

“Sir, if you took him, tell me where you put him so I can care for him.”

Jesus said, “Mary” (John 20:15-16).

I see your grief. Why do you weep? Who are you looking for?

This past year I have been flooded with grief knowing the ways we respond to injury and pain with retaliation, humiliation, and tightening the grip, only set the stage for future battles, radicalizing a new generation. Who will rescue us from this vicious cycle of death? Jesus Christ—who came not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be delivered, saved (John 3:16). Serving now among Mennonites, they have focused my mind on nonviolence and peacemaking as a central expression of new life in Christ.

Suffering violence and coordinated mockery of justice to the point of death, God raises Jesus from the dead—not to start a reign of retribution and breathe out murder like Saul—but to usher in the kingdom by breathing out peace, inciting forgiveness, touching wounds, and drawing close enough to the grieving to know why they weep, what they seek and call them by name.

“Woman, why do you weep? Who are you looking for?”

I’m weeping for the stories we tell our children from a young age that violence is sad but inevitable in conflict. I weep because our culture pays token tribute to bodies

we've called upon to destroy enemies without counting the real cost. I weep because too many from one generation to the next navigate places of untold violence in their neighborhoods, seared into their bodies, while the rest just pass by.

Today, we celebrate the age-old story that Jesus conquers death. Yet, how can Jesus conquer death until he also conquers our need for vengeance, for retaliation in the name of safety and security? The truth is, I am only ever as safe and secure as Jesus—and we saw what happened to him. And through his resurrection, Mary sees what God can do! **Jesus puts to death retaliation in the name of God, in the name of justice, in the name of righteousness.** At sight of the risen Lord there is no gathering an army, no call to arms, no retribution even for those of his flock who betrayed or fled. Instead, Jesus gets right past fears that lock us in and breathes out peace ... the peace of a new creation. By announcing peace and calling upon forgiveness, the risen Jesus—the Alpha and Omega—lets go of the right to retaliate and calls followers to put an end to vicious cycles of violence and death.

“Who are you looking for?”

I'm looking for someone to not retaliate in the face of violence. Someone to stop us from our warring madness. Someone to reveal another way. I need this Savior. I need this gardener of a new creation. And I need us to see him and believe.

This Easter season, may you find ones safe enough to share *why you weep* and *who you are looking for*. When we get close enough to safely touch one another's wounds and breathe out peace, there awaits the risen Jesus, the one who conquers death, gardener of a new creation.