

“Woman, why are you weeping?”

It is a question the two angels in the empty tomb likely already know the answer to.

Just days before this, Mary Magdalene stood at the foot of the cross in Jerusalem and witnessed Jesus’s agonizing death. As one of his closest disciples, the pain and sorrow she feels must be excruciating. And now she hears the question, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

She explains to the angels they’ve taken away her Lord. Her grief swells to a near-unbearable point, in the realization she won’t be able to finish anointing Jesus’s body, an important ritual in the Jewish burial custom. After losing her beloved friend and teacher, now she cannot experience these first steps toward closure and healing.

“Woman, why are you weeping?”

Those words may have perplexed Mary. After all she’d lost, why would she *not* be weeping?

Those of us experiencing loss of some kind may be similarly confused by the question, or by variations of it we encounter, particularly this time of year. The exact words may not be the same, but the message runs along the same vein. As the Christmas season brings a frenzy of holiday festivities and the pressure to be happy and have fun, all around us, we are told: “It’s the most wonderful time of the year”!

From this cacophony of noise rises the question: Why are you weeping?

A world that has taken the Christ out of Christmas cannot understand the darkness this season can bring for some. It's almost as if we're expected to compartmentalize grief—to keep it in private places, to avoid making people uncomfortable with our pain.

Grief expert and author Francis Weller speaks to how we often attempt to compartmentalize grief, but how welcoming our grief can open us in unexpected ways. Weller says:¹

No one escapes suffering in this life. None of us is exempt from loss, pain, illness, and death. How is it that we have so little understanding of these essential experiences? How is it that we have attempted to keep grief separated from our lives and only begrudgingly acknowledge its presence at the most obvious of times, such as a funeral?

It is the accumulated losses of a lifetime that slowly weigh us down—the times of rejection, the moments of isolation when we felt cut off from the sustaining touch of comfort and love. It is an ache that resides in the heart, the faint echo calling us back to the times of loss. We are called back, not so much to make things right, but to acknowledge what happened to us. Grief asks that we honor the loss and, in doing so, deepen our capacity for compassion...Grief is part of the dance.

“Grief is part of the dance.” Like Mary, we may be grieving the loss of someone we loved—those we will remember tonight. Or we may be experiencing grief over

¹ Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief* (North Atlantic Books: 2015), 19–20, 70.

other losses: shattered relationships, struggles with a mental illness or other health problem, financial challenges, or just sheer loneliness.

This season can seem to be spinning madly around us with forced merriment and multitudes of distractions. We may encounter people confused by our sadness, impatient with us, or worse, dismissing our pain. But as we wait for the hope of God incarnate, Advent offers a space to bring that grief. An opportunity to experience healing through the coming light of Jesus Christ, not the baby sleeping in the manger, but Jesus standing beside us as we peer into the empty tomb—Jesus weeping with us.

God knows our pain, and he knows why we weep. Psalm 139 says God knows our sitting down and rising up, he discerns our thoughts from afar. Indeed, there is not a word on our lips that he does not know. No thoughts hidden from him. He created our inmost parts, knit us together in our mother's womb.

It is an intimacy unlike any other we know.

As we offer our pain to God this evening, may we find hope in this intimacy and in God's enduring love for us—the depth and breadth of which we can only try to comprehend. As we spend this time together honoring our loved ones, may we experience this sacred space as one of compassion, for ourselves and for each other. May we find peace and healing in community. And may the Holy Spirit comfort and keep us this season and all year long. Amen.