

## **“Why Are You Weeping?”**

An exegetical and ontological remark on John 20:13 & 15

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### Abstract

Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; Grammatically and syntactically, it is the same question, posed first by the angels and then by our risen Lord. However, considered ontologically, it becomes clear that the angels are asking a question about human grief that is beyond their comprehension on account of their angelic nature, whereas Jesus, in asking the question, is personally caring for Mary, this by virtue of His *homoousios* with us human beings (see Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ* Concordia Publishing House 1538 / 1971). This question thus suggests a significant role for ontology in our exegetical practice.

“Why are you weeping?” (John 20:13 & 15). First, the angels asked her. Then, Jesus asked Mary the very same question. Why? Well, it was the morning of that first Easter, after all! We know that the question was part and parcel of the historical events of His resurrection. Thus, this question was part of the historical happenings that first Easter Sunday. Mary was there, weeping at Jesus’ grave, three days after His death by crucifixion. This question is what the angels asked her. This question is what Jesus asked her. But this historical affirmation hardly exhausts the text. In view of John’s verbal parsimony and his stated purpose in writing his gospel (20:31), we recognize that there is more to it than that. Mary was being led to appropriate for herself the truth of Jesus’ rising from death and its impact on her very being as a human being. As are we right now, in the hearing of this text.

And so, consider this question, Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; In light of Jesus’ resurrection, John is inviting us to learn what it *means* that we human beings, unlike the angels, cry at the graves of those we love. In our text we first see angelic beings interrogating Mary, a human being, about her human experience of grief. Next, we see Jesus, being of one substance with the Father and being fully human, teaching Mary and us believing readers the meaning of our weeping. Recognizing these various types of beings in conversation in our text (angels, human, God incarnate) entails our *ontological* understanding of this Gospel. Our human capacity for an

ontological understanding such as this suggests that we might construe the angels' question as an open-minded *phenomenological* interrogation, whereas we might take Jesus' question to be imminently *personal* – a question that He asks by virtue of His Person, in the hypostatic union of His two natures. These two moments of this question contribute substantially to our work as pastors who provide for Jesus' grieving people an ongoing “exegesis of existence from a divine perspective.”<sup>1</sup> Both aspects of our understanding (the phenomenological and the meaningful) are crucial. How so? Well, the angels' question leads us to comprehend grief as a human phenomenon, a comprehension that the angels, by virtue of their non-human being, cannot achieve. Following this, we, as the kind of beings who grieve, discover that the meaning of our weeping is comprehensible only in Christ, by virtue of His being in nature very God *and* truly a human being, in one Person.

This comprises a hermeneutic circle for exegesis, so to speak. Abraham Heschl explains, “To comprehend what phenomena are, it is important to suspend judgment and think in detachment; to comprehend what phenomena mean, it is necessary to suspend indifference and become involved.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the angelic question invites a detached or objective consideration of why human beings weep; whereas Jesus' question leads us to our personal appropriation of His being-in-the-world as God incarnate.

### 1.

Word-for-word the same question is posed both by the angels and by Jesus: Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; “Woman, why are you weeping?” The address is significant, no doubt. It would not surprise any of us to compare notes and find that we have each, in his own way, preached Easter and funeral sermons outlined according to the three ways in which Mary is addressed: Γύναι, τί

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschl, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, Inc., 2001, xvii. Hereafter cited as *The Prophets*.

<sup>2</sup> *The Prophets*, xxvi.

κλαίεις; [...] Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; τίνα ζητεῖς; [...] Μαριάμ. But it is the verb that generates our ontological *meditatio*.

The verb κλαίω ought to be understood as weeping in the sense of grieving. It is hardly adequate to take it as “crying,” as if κλαίω signifies a generic tearing-up, regardless of circumstances. That is to say, κλαίω has nothing to do with slicing onions at the kitchen counter; rather, it has everything to do with what one does at the grave of a loved one. Neither the angels nor her Lord were inviting Mary to consider the biology behind her lacrimation. What, then?

This is the point to adumbrate the case for a phenomenological understanding of these questions concerning Mary’s weeping vis-à-vis John’s term κλαίω. Phenomenology, popularly thought to be a philosophical method of thinking about “the things themselves” (Husserl), is best construed not as a method at all, but as a radical attempt “to get to the truth of matters, to describe *phenomena*, in the broadest sense as whatever appears in the manner in which it appears ... Explanations are not to be imposed before the phenomena have been understood from within [the experience as we have it].”<sup>3</sup> Theory has to wait on actual experience. This is the fundamental insight of the twentieth-century mode of thinking about human being and our knowledge of reality known as phenomenology.

If we approach our question phenomenologically and thus avoid the imposition of our theories upon the text, what can we discern about Mary’s actual experience when she was being asked graveside, “Why are you weeping?” As noted, responding to the question as if it were about Mary’s biology would be wildly inappropriate. Shall we, then, respond as if it is a question about Mary’s psychology? But, equally clearly, neither the angels nor Jesus were inviting Mary to consider what stage of grief she was at, according to Kubler-Ross. In context, it is doubtful that the question, Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; invites what we today would call a psychological analysis. We

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<sup>3</sup> Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 4.

need another way, a pre-categorical way of reading of the text and our word κλαίω. So, by way of an induction by complete enumeration, we come to an *ontological* approach. This requires a brief excursus.

By *ontological* let us understand “a distinctly human understanding of being or reality.” This understanding derives, for example, from the early work of Martin Heidegger in his *Being and Time*. There are a number of different ways of putting this, but for biblical exegesis, an ontological approach means understanding the biblical text without overwriting it. On the one hand, this means not imposing our (logical, biological, psychological) categories or theories on the text. On the other hand, it means submitting ourselves as human beings to the Word and its words with the confidence that the Holy Ghost provides herein a *surplus of meaning*, to cut and paste a phrase from Paul Ricoeur.<sup>4</sup> It is therefore critical to our exegetical task that we practice, shall we say, a *via negativa* in regard to our scientific and cultural presuppositions. This, of course, is the benefit of Luther’s insistence upon an education in the liberal arts for us as exegetes. We are liberated from our chronological prejudices and cultural myopethia by living, as educated persons, in a wider, less impoverished world.

As a case in point, consider the term *pathos* as a way to conceptualize God’s relationship to us human creatures. I have already cited Abraham Heschel, a twentieth-century theologian and philosopher. As Heschel elaborates, pathos, or our felt relationship to the world, is disclosed in a particular mode or form, a mode more primordial than our particular rational deliberations. That is to say, our felt relationship to the other may be disclosed as love and anger, grief and joy, mercy and wrath.<sup>5</sup> In an extended appendix to *The Prophets*, Heschel alludes to the problems we have, as moderns, in understanding the term pathos. Whereas the ancient classical term *pathos* signified the various conditions of feeling and will by which one related to the world, in modernity pathos has lost this connotation altogether. In this vein he quotes Hegel on the almost

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas Christian University Press, 1976).

<sup>5</sup> *The Prophets*, 618.

insurmountable difficulty involved in efforts at translating the word *pathos* in a way that reaffirms the traditional “nobler and more universal sense” of the term: “Pathos in this sense is a power of the emotional life which completely justifies itself, an essential part of the content of rationality and the free will.”<sup>6</sup> In contrast to the reductive and materialistic views of the human being that are the dominant way of understanding human beings in our scientific age, Heschel, as a liberally educated exegete of the Old Testament, is open-minded to the warp and woof of the prophetic books. This, it could be argued, is a very different way of being-in-creation, than is experienced by the angels. Which is to say that he lives and moves and has his being in God, just as angelic creatures do, but that his *way of being* is different; it is human being.

Now, Heschel’s contention is that *pathos* characterizes God’s relationship to us. As he puts it, “The fundamental thought in the Bible is not creation, but God’s care for His creation. ... All men care for the world; the prophet cares for God’s care.”<sup>7</sup> In our exegesis of texts such as John 20 we need to practice *ontological care*, on pain of reducing the text to a mere confirmation of our contemporary categories of thinking – thinking about human being as nothing more than biology or psychology – and on pain of missing the surplus of meaning provided in the text as it is.

## 2.

According to this ontological understanding, then, weeping is meaningful for human beings as such, but what does weeping *mean*? Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; The angels’ question invites our careful contemplation of weeping and grief as a distinctly human phenomenon, whereas Jesus’ question teaches us the meaning of grief in terms of involvement, His incarnational involvement with us. Jesus is the second moment, the other indispensable aspect, of the exegesis of weeping that we are seeking. Let us turn to Jesus and Mary. Γύναι, τί κλαίεις; Same grammar and syntax; different question. This is no longer an ontological question, but a personal conversation.

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<sup>6</sup> *The Prophets*, 630.

<sup>7</sup> *The Prophet*, 619.

In terms familiar from mediaeval philosophy, there is in Jesus' question no mention of universals, but only *haecceity*, this unique and particular relationship of His with Mary. It is a profoundly sympathetic, a *with-pathos* relationship, in fact.

As our great High Priest, Jesus sympathizes with us. Think of this divine sympathy as His divine *pathos* in Heschel's pre-modern sense, an emotional attunement that we know Jesus has felt deeply and still feels deeply toward human beings by virtue of His human being. No disagreement with Heschel's contention that the fundamental concern of the Bible is God's care for His creation: "The basic feature of pathos and the primary content of the prophet's consciousness is a *divine attentiveness and concern*."<sup>8</sup> But over and beyond Heschel's exposition, it must be said that, whereas God's *pathos* is latent in the Old Testament ("the Bible" in Heschel's terminology) it is made blatant in the New Testament. Jesus instantiates this fundamental concern. He embodies it. He is the sympathetic God, incarnate. As Moses Maimonides puts it in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, God is best known through His actions. In a word – that is to say, in a Lutheran and blatantly New Testament way of putting it – God's *pathos* is best known in terms of a *theologia crucis*. In the past God spoke of His care for us humans through the prophets in many and varied ways; in these latter days He has spoken to us of His *pathos* by His Son. Jesus, God's Word become flesh, living among us, came to Mary and asked, "Why are you weeping?"

As Mary undoubtedly came to realize, likely in the course of this very conversation recorded in John 20, her Rabbi Jesus, as the Incarnate and Only-Begotten, learned by hands-on experience how human beings feel at death and separation. His sympathy is not the consequence of a cosmic sympathetic vibration between creatures and Creator. On the contrary, his pathos is a consequence of His divine nature and is made blatant in His actions, being one of us. As we declare in the Creed, He is of one substance with the Father. As we may declare in the present

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<sup>8</sup> *The Prophets*, 618.

case, He is also of one substance with grieving humanity.<sup>9</sup> This is not a metaphorical picture, nor is this an analogical relationship between Jesus' suffering and ours; rather, this is what a modern logician would call "a type-type identity" in contradistinction to a mere token-token identity. In our familiar theological vocabulary we ought to say that Jesus' sharing in our experience of weeping and grief is *homoousios* in contradistinction to a merely *homoiousios* experience.

As we are affected by the death of a loved one, He is affected by the death of a loved one. This affect is, *for Him*, particular (*haecceity*), and *from Him*, universal (universal justification). His pathos, His love-in-action, extends to all and to each, hypostatically. Jesus' hypostatic union means that He is the One who can and does teach us the meaning of human grief. We ought to emphasize that it means that He is no theorist or grief therapist. He knows grief – "knows" in the Hebrew sense of "intimate personal acquaintance." The incarnate Lord knows grief as it is. In addition, He knows grief in terms of His own comprehension and domination of death.

"Why are you weeping?" is a question that we could ask of Jesus Himself. But the cause of Jesus' weeping – for which we can meditate on John 11:35, Luke 19:41, and Hebrews 5:7 – is His divine *pathos*. We see what this entails in the theology of the cross. There is, Jesus teaches us, a fundamental wrongness to death. Human beings ought to rage and rage against that dark night. He certainly did. Consider Rilke's poetic meditation "The Raising of Lazarus".

Yes, it was necessary for this common sort,  
since they required signs, signs that screamed.  
Yet He dreamt how for Martha and Mary  
it would be enough simply to see  
that He *could*. But none of them believed,  
they all said to Him: Lord, why come *now*?  
And so He went, to do the unallowed

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Martin Chemnitz (J.A.O. Preus, transl.), *The Two Natures in Christ* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1578 / 1971): "... the hypostatic union of the two natures of Christ does not result from a change, conversion, or equation of the substance of the natures ... but in the incarnate Christ there are and remain two complete, different, distinct natures, the divine and the human, so that according to the deity Christ is and remains of the same substance (*homoousios*) with the Father, but according to the humanity He forever is and remains of the same substance with His brothers," 171.

to peaceful Nature.  
 In anger. Eyes almost shut,  
 he asked where the grave was. Tormentedly.  
 it seemed to Him that his tears streamed,  
 and they thronged behind him, full of curiosity.  
 Even on the way He thought it monstrous,  
 an appalling, frivolous experiment,  
 but suddenly a great fire broke out in Him,  
 such an argument  
 against their prized distinctions,  
 their death and life, their here and there,  
 that He was enmity in every limb  
 when He instructed hoarsely: Lift the stone!  
 A voice shouted that he must stink by now  
 (for he'd lain there four days) – but He  
 stood tensed, entirely filled with that gesture  
 which rose in Him and heavily, so heavily  
 lifted His hand – (no hand ever raised itself  
 this slowly, with this much weight)  
 until it stood there, shining in the air;  
 and then it clenched almost clawlike:  
 for now He dreaded that all the dead might  
 come rushing back through the suction  
 of that tomb, where the thing had started  
 to writhe up, larva-like, from its stiff reclining –  
 but then just a single shape stood there,  
 crooked in the daylight, and one witnessed:  
 the inexact vague Life again accept it.<sup>10</sup>

Why are you weeping, Mary? Why are you weeping, son of man? Why did the Son of Man weep? Jesus' raising of Lazarus was a prefiguring of the Resurrection which gives meaning to our grieving, certainly. It was also His validation-by-solidarity of our weeping. Jesus did not come to

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<sup>10</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke (Edward Snow, transl.), "The Raising of Lazarus" in *Uncollected Poems* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), 36 German; 37 English.

Lazarus' grave as an Epictetus, the premier Stoic; but as a Jeremiah, as the prophets' Prophet, in lamentation; thus, Mary and we are right to weep at a death. Jesus wept. We are right to rage against the separation and to feel tormented by the loss. We are right to lament the wrongness of a loved one's death. Jesus cried out. We are right to call out – not for acceptance, but to call out to God for remedy and for redress, for salvation and for resurrection. As we can learn from His question to Mary, Jesus expects us to be weeping and wailing and coming to Him thus labored and burdened in our grief. According to John the Evangelist, the angels did not excoriate Mary for weeping. According to the text, Jesus neither upbraided nor mildly rebuked Mary for her weeping. He validated her weeping and her lament in His own Person, there outside the tomb He had exploded as evidence of His power to raise the dead.

A few days before speaking with Mary at His own erstwhile grave, Jesus had told the women along His *Via Dolorosa* not to weep for Him but for themselves and their children (Luke 23:28). The holy evangelists quote Jesus on both occasions, Good Friday and Easter morning, with the same Greek word, κλαίω. As demonstrated, this weeping ought to be taken as grieving. According to New Testament usage, κλαίω is a term for expressing pain at what is to come, but in an attitude of submission to God.<sup>11</sup> *Lamentation* would also be a most suitable translation.

By saying that our question “Why are you weeping?” can be rendered as “Why are you grieving or lamenting?” we have brought to light an additional feature of the meaning of grief, namely, that we as born-from-above human beings can and do give voice to why we are right to weep. In lamentation we find an avenue to exhibit the eschatological character of our grieving. This ought to be publicized. Indeed, as Oswald Bayer has recommended, we ought to develop a

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<sup>11</sup> See the article on κλαίω by Rengstorff in Gerhard Kittel, ed. (Geoffrey Bromiley, transl.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1978), Vol. III, 722-26.

theology of lament.<sup>12</sup> For example, recall David's poetic lament at the death of Saul and Jonathan (2 Samuel 1). Eugene Peterson says,

Lament isn't an inarticulate wail. Lament notices details, images, and relationships. Pain *can* become poetry. Poetry is our most personal use of words. It is our way of entering deeply into the experience and bringing beauty out of it.

Lament is deeply private, but it can also be deeply public. David's lament fused the personal with the communal. Lament keeps us in touch with our leaders and our friends, our losses and our defeats, our limitations and our suffering. – in all their humanity. Lament keeps us connected with reality, and with the ultimate of all realities: God. That's why David composed his lament but ordered that "everyone in Judah learn it by heart" (verse 18).<sup>13</sup>

Weeping is an ontological activity. Why do we weep? Our lamentations are not an end in themselves – as if the *telos* of grief were the production of poetic expressions of our pain of loss – rather, our lamentations are ultimately penultimate. Our weeping is an expression of our kind of being. We are the kind of being for whom being is a central concern. In the twentieth century, Heidegger described this as *Sein zum Tode*, our being-towards-death. As Christians, we can describe this as *Sein zum Auferstehung*, our being-towards-resurrection.

In effect, the question is now put to us, τί κλάιεις; in order to provoke us to upgrade our ontology in light of the reality of the Gospel. Grieving as human beings, we continue to feel the gravity of death. Grieving as Mary's kith and kin in the faith, we experience in addition the grace of Christ's redemptive work *pro nobis*. Thus, we believers are human beings with a different ontology. As Luther has it in his commentary on Isaiah 53, "This is the second part of our understanding and justification, to know that Christ suffered and was cursed and killed, but FOR US. It is not enough to know the matter, the suffering, but it is necessary to know its function."<sup>14</sup>

The ontological difference between the grief of the Christian and those who grieve without hope

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<sup>12</sup> Oswald Bayer, *Toward a Theology of Lament*, in David Whitford, ed., *Caritas et Reformatio: Essays in Church and Society in Honor of Carl Lindberg* (CPH: Concordia Academic Press, 2002), 211-220.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene Peterson, *First and Second Samuel*, 144-145, quoted in *Conversations: The Message with Its Translator* (Colorado Springs: NavPress Publishing Group, 2007), 444.

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther (Herbert Bouman, transl.), *Luther's Works*, Vol. 17, *Lectures on Isaiah*, Chapters 40-66 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 220-21.

in Christ is *Christ*. Because of His resurrection, that is, the rising from death of the One who is acquainted with grief (Isaiah 53:3-4), the gravity of grief as experienced by Mary on the first Easter and by us today is modulated and sanctified by grace.<sup>15</sup> Thus our very being, along with our ontological understanding of what it means to be human beings, has been altered by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> After composing my phenomenological depiction of grief as gravity I came across Simone Weil's meditations on gravity and grace. For her aphorisms, such as "All the *natural* movements of the soul are analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception," see Simone Weil (Emma Craufurd, translator), *Gravity and Grace* (Routledge, 1997).