

April 16, Resurrection of the Lord

## **At grief's mercy, Mary stays at the site of her loss.**

by [Ayanna Johnson Watkins](#) in the [March 29, 2017](#) issue

It was a sound like I had never heard. A deep, guttural cry, a groan of deep pain. It sounded both nearby and far off, and I wondered where it was coming from. Then I realized it was coming from me.

It was a Sunday, and I was in church. I had helped lead worship that day, so I was sitting on the dais. Then the pastor invited all who desired healing to come join him for prayer at the altar—and before I knew it, I was out of my seat and halfway there. Normally I would have hesitated, telling myself that, as a minister, I should go only to pray with others who came forward. Or I'd have reminded myself that I was relatively new at this church, and I wouldn't want strangers to wonder what was wrong with me. But when the call for prayer came, my feet moved faster than my tendency to self-protect.

I was struggling that day; I'd been struggling for months. My husband and I had experienced two miscarriages in six months. I couldn't pray on my own anymore—I was too angry, too hurt. I'd been doing what I thought was a good job holding it together on the outside—going to work, going to church, showing up. Inside, I was exhausted. I'd never experienced loss like this before, and I didn't know how to grieve. I wanted healing, less for my body than for my broken heart and busted-up faith, because I was tired of feeling like a shell of myself.

At the altar, I knelt on the cushion and rested my head and arms on the rail. I closed my eyes, and the pastor began to pray. That's when I heard the cry, my cry. It sounded horrible, but it felt amazing—like the first real thing I'd done in months. And so I kept crying out over and over again. My eyes were still closed, but I began to feel a bustle of activity around me. People were doing what Minister Me would have done if someone else made that terrible sound: patting my back, wiping my forehead, trying to make me comfortable, continuing to pray. But even with all the

commotion, I felt somehow quiet, like I had finally expressed something true to God.

In our Gospel text, Mary Magdalene discovers that Jesus' tomb is open and his body is missing. She runs to tell the disciples, and two men rush back to the scene with her. When they see for themselves that Jesus is indeed gone, they turn and go home. Mary stays—though she doesn't understand any better than they do. She remains at the site of her grief and cries. Strangers meet her there. They ask her why she cries, and she is forced to revisit the pain by naming it again and again.

Before that day at the altar, I kept looking for the right way to grieve. Falling apart didn't seem right—not in the face of so many daily responsibilities that needed my attention. Skipping over the grief didn't seem right either. Not just our loved ones but our hoped-for ones had died. That seemed like it was worth some attention—even if, or maybe because, we never had the chance to meet them. Some friends recommended moving through the grief slowly, creating ritual around it. This seemed like an unbearable torture—and it seemed that if I moved too slowly, I might never emerge. I literally felt like I was left at the site of an empty tomb, an empty womb. I didn't think I could bear to stay there.

But Mary stays. She stays and cries; she lets grief prevail. And at grief's mercy, she stays at the site of her loss, face to face with the empty tomb.

I already knew that grief is a process you can't rush or control. You mostly just survive its waves until you realize they're easing up, little by little. But Mary manages to do more than survive. Somehow she emerges with something she did not have before. Staying at the site of her loss—not running away, but letting herself experience and express the pain—she encounters revelation. When the strangers she meets compel her to name her pain, she realizes that things are not quite as she thought.

Singer LeAnn Rimes recently described her album *Remnants* as her experience of learning the value of falling apart. She said that the first time we encounter something that threatens to really knock us back, our tendency is to fight to keep standing. We think this is victory, this is grieving well. But Rimes has learned to give in to falling apart—and discovering the beauty in it. When you crumble, she says, you're able to assess the pieces and preserve the remnant that is authentically you. From those authentic pieces, you can be remade anew.

There is a resurrection that comes of grief. The one who grieves is herself resurrected as someone new, with a new understanding of herself and of God. Mary's turning point comes when she tearfully describes how Jesus, her loved one, her hoped-for one, is not only dead but missing—utterly gone. Then God calls her by name, revealing that the one she thought she lost was right in front of her. She brings her tears to the tomb and leaves celebrating new life.

When I got up from the altar, I was different. I was not miraculously cured of my grief; I have had many hard days since that one. But I went to the site of my grief and let my broken heart fall apart—and when I was all poured out, I met God there. I could finally see that God had been there all along, waiting for me to be real. God revealed that beyond my empty womb, my broken heart, I was still in there. God called my name and called me back to life.