

## LECTIONARY GUIDE for Jeremiah 31:1-6 and John 20:1-18

### Jeremiah 31:1-6

The Prophet Jeremiah proclaims hope for Israel's future. As they survived a period of the destruction of their homeland, exile to Babylon and deep sadness, they are reminded that God never left them. God was always loving and faithful through covenant (though seemingly from far away).

God's people are promised joy in their return home. Grace will overcome the sword, which caused their exile. Peoples from the north (Samaria) and the south (Judah) will be reunited. Together they will dance and make merry with their tambourines, as did Miriam (Exodus 15:20). Their shelters will be rebuilt. The land will be replanted with grapevines to produce an abundant harvest. Jeremiah ends by pronouncing a call to worship, "*Come, let us [all] go up to Zion to the Lord our God.*"

### Ten Questions

1. The Prophets of the Hebrew Bible bring a variety of messages. Here Jeremiah offers one of joy. What are some of the joys to which they look forward? Do we have some of the same joys?
2. Apart from the People of Israel, our religious ancestors, who are other people who suffered the destruction of their homeland? Perhaps, indigenous people such as Native Americans both in North and South America; groups in Africa; European Jews during the Holocaust; the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (the city with the most Christians), and war-ravaged nations such as Vietnam and Cambodia, Syria and Afghanistan? How have they adapted and perhaps reclaimed joy?
3. Who are other people who suffered exile to foreign lands? This means that they were sent by conquerors or rulers to foreign countries. Perhaps, slaves from Africa to the South and North America, and Europe? (Last August, members and friends of our congregation gathered to mark the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of the first slave ship to America by ringing hand bells.). Where does Jeremiah say God was for his People during this exile? In the wilderness...far away...but connected through a covenant?
5. After much suffering God's People are promised return to their homeland. They were over-joyed, beyond what words can describe. Who are some other people, who were allowed to return home after a war, event, or change in governmental laws? Perhaps, those in the U.S. or other military; citizens after they were displaced during a war; Jews who after the Holocaust chose to emigrate to the newly-formed nation of Israel; Palestinians to the Gaza strip after their war with Israel; Americans abroad after the outbreak of Covid-19?

6. In this return, the north and south were reunited. Can you name other examples of people, who previously were separated and became “enemies,” were reunited or chose to be reunited? Perhaps, Northerners and Southerners after the Civil War; African American slaves and Freed slaves? British and Asian Indians after the establishment of an independent India? Dutch Afrikaners and Africans after the democratization of South Africa? African Americans and Whites?

7. Making merry with tambourines is an example here for celebration. What are other ways to show happiness? Why is music a universal mode of displaying joy? When do we play instruments, sing and dance?

8. Eating and drinking are also universal expressions of festivity and abundance. What stories do we have of loved ones, families, neighborhoods and circles of friends celebrating holidays and family events? With Covid-19 these gatherings may be disrupted, except perhaps with tele-communication. How do we cope?

9. Jeremiah ends with a call to return to worship. Why? How were his people, and we been changed by, give thanks for return and homecoming?

10. After Covid-19 is cured; a new vaccine is discovered; and at least 90% of the national (and world) population is vaccinated, according to entrepreneur Bill Gates, we may finally return to “normal.” Perhaps, we may rename this the return to “normality,” the “new normal,” or our post-Covid-19 lives. Will we say a prayer of thanksgiving, celebrate with others, and give thanks to God starting with a Jeremiah call to worship?

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### **John 20:1-18**

The Evangelist John describes the Resurrection of Christ. He tells of how Mary Magdalene went to Jesus’ tomb in morning darkness. There she found the stone removed. So, she ran to tell Simon Peter and the “other disciple whom Jesus loved” what had happened. Those two ran to the tomb, with the “other disciple” arriving first and glimpsing the linen clothes strewn in the tomb. He waited for Simon Peter, who finally arrived, entered the tomb and saw the same linen wrappings; then he himself entered. With this he “saw and believed.” Then the two returned home.

Mary remained and wept outside the tomb. When she looked in, she saw two messengers in white. They asked why she was weeping. She explained that it was because “*they took away her Lord and she did not know where he was.*” At the same time, she noticed someone, who she took to be the gardener, behind her. So, she turned around. The person asked her the same question. She explained in the same way. The person, who was indeed Jesus, called her by her name, *Mary*. With that, she knew who he was, and responded “*Rabbouni*” (teacher in Aramaic; rabbi in Hebrew). Jesus said, “*do*

*not hold on to me for I am ascending to the Father, but go tell your brothers of this.*” She did, and declared “I have seen the Lord.”

### **Ten Questions**

1. Who was the first to go to the tomb, tell the disciples that Jesus’ body was missing, weep, see the two messengers and Jesus, hear her name called out by Jesus, identify Him as teacher, be told that he was ascending to God and tell the disciples of this and that she had “seen the Lord”? Why might this have been surprising? Why is it important?
2. Who followed Mary Magdalene? What roles had been played by Simon Peter and “the other disciple whom Jesus loved,” the Beloved Disciple?
3. Why was there a lot of back-and-forth or deference shown to some? For example, why did Mary not enter the tomb first herself? Why did she retrieve the two disciples? Why did the “other disciple,” who arrived first, not go in himself but wait for Simon Peter? Why did Jesus instruct Mary to tell the disciples what she saw? How did these actions reflect social hierarchy?
4. What details might signal that the Beloved Disciple could have been a woman, not a man?
5. What is the symbolic importance of the “two messengers (angels) in white”? How were they related to Jesus? Why do we think the two, then Jesus asked the very same questions?
6. Why did Mary weep? Was she the only character in this story to show some feeling? Why? Remember that Jesus also wept on the Mt. of Olives.
7. Why did the Beloved Disciple see and believe after entering the tomb and seeing the linens? Why did Mary believe after hearing her name? If the Beloved Disciple was a visual learner, was Mary an audial learner? Which are we? What does it take for us to believe that we are in the presence of God?
7. Some find a degree of dramatic stiffness in this story. Notice below, however, a possible literary/dramatic form underlying it that highlights parallel meanings:
  1. Mary goes to the tomb then returns to tell the disciples;
  2. The two disciples go the tomb; the Beloved Disciple sees and believes;
  3. Mary weeps and speaks to the two messengers;
  4. Mary still weeps and speaks to Jesus;
  5. Mary encounters the risen Jesus; she hears and believes;
  6. Mary leaves the tomb then returns to tell the disciples.

Which events frame the story? #1 and 6 in which Mary goes from the tomb, to tell the disciples. What happens in #2 and 5? The Beloved Disciple and then Mary believes. What happens in #3 and 4, the center of the drama? Mary weeps and encounters first the two messengers then Jesus. Might John, who was well-educated, have used this structure to show how we humans often find connection between human and divine?

8. How do we feel about this story? Is it believable? What questions and blessings does it raise for us?

9. Jesus said that “*he was ascending to the Father.*” What does John point to about Resurrection? Is it the same as ascension? What does Jesus’ Resurrection mean to us? Is it important to us?

10. When we say we are Easter People, not Good Friday people, what does this mean? Here are three possibilities related to Resurrection – life after death, life from death, life in spite of death – in our present lives. Describe them in our own lives. Say a closing prayer for gratitude for these Resurrection experiences.

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