

“When God calls your name”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018

John 20:1-18

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Today is Easter Sunday! Hallelujah! But that’s not all today is. Today also happens to be April Fool’s Day. It’s been more than 60 years since Easter fell on April 1, and the Internet is going nuts.

Children, if you ever want proof of what you have long suspected—that your parents are secretly evil—look no further than the moms and dads posting right now about all the ways they can torment you this Easter. One particularly cruel mom noticed that Brussels sprouts are about the same size and shape as cake pops and doughnut holes, so today she’s dipping Brussels sprouts in chocolate and handing them out to her children as if they were dessert. Those children are going to be very surprised... Another blogger has suggested putting frozen peas inside Easter eggs, or perhaps practical items like paper clips, or maybe—if you’re feeling especially mean—empty candy wrappers. They’re empty because mom and dad ate all your candy.

Honestly, I feel like today is the answer to every atheist’s prayer. And yes, wouldn’t be it ironic if atheists prayed? I can hear their prayer now: “Oh God, please give those Christians a sign of how foolish they’ve been to believe you exist.” What’s even more ironic is that, now that their prayer has been answered, they might have to start believing in God.

Still, I think April Fool’s Day is an appropriate pairing with today’s reading from John.

I wonder if Mary Magdalene, as she approached Jesus’ tomb, felt like a fool for believing that Jesus was somehow different—a fool to believe that love could ever prevail over the cruelty and sinfulness of the world.

In all the other Gospels, Mary comes to the tomb at dawn with other women, when the sun is already shining. But in the Gospel of John, Mary comes to the tomb alone while it’s still dark. Mary comes to the tomb, while she’s still grieving, while she’s still afraid, while she’s still feeling like a fool.

There, in the pitch black of night, Mary sees that the stone is rolled away, but Mary doesn’t yet live in a resurrection world. Her heart is still on that hill where she saw them kill her Lord. So she doesn’t consider that Jesus might have risen from the dead. For her, the empty tomb is not comforting; it’s painful.

And, there in the dark, she weeps, because she cannot find Jesus. She weeps because she’s lost God.

Even angels cannot assuage her grief. Mary doesn't even seem to register that they are angels. "She treats them," writes Barbara Lundblad, "like orderlies stripping a hospital bed where you were looking for someone you love."

It's odd how what we're feeling can shape what we're able to see. For instance, I've read this text in the Gospel of John more times than I can count, and yet I never noticed the phrase "while it was still dark." I never saw it—until last year, when I sat on my porch, on Easter morning, reading this same story, a week after Ezra and Leo had died. That's when I saw these words for the first time.

In the same way, many of us today are unable to see a risen Jesus. We're not sure we really buy into this story of Jesus rising from the dead and redeeming the world. It seems like a foolish thing to believe, when the world around us feels more like Golgotha than the resurrection. We've got bills we can't pay, illnesses we can't cure, violence we can't stop, sins we can't overcome, lost loved ones we can't retrieve.

Maybe all of this is just one big exercise in wishful thinking, and someone really did steal Jesus' body. Maybe there is no resurrection after all.

And that's where this question would remain if it weren't for what happens next in the story.

Mary turns away from the angels, not even waiting for a response. No answer they could give her would suffice. Even if they were shout, as we do today, that Jesus is risen, it would not be enough. She doesn't seek an explanation; she doesn't want a theory; she wants her friend; she wants God in the flesh.

And that is precisely who shows up. Jesus walks up to Mary. He asks her what she's looking for. Mary doesn't recognize him. She still can't see what's right in front of her.

What happens next is one of the most intimate and profound moments in all of Scripture. I imagine Jesus pausing for a moment, looking long into the face of this woman who has walked with him throughout his ministry, who stayed at his side even when others abandoned him. I imagine the corners of his mouth curling into a smile, as he gently touches her shoulder, maybe wipes a tear or two away. He says her name, "Mary."

There is so much in that name: Mary, don't you know me? Don't you see me? Sweet Mary, I'm right here. I see you. I know you. And I want you to know that something amazing has happened. I am alive. You weren't wrong. You weren't a fool. Love is stronger. God is here.

This is the first time that Mary's name has been spoken. Twice she has been addressed simply as "Woman." As long as she was nameless, the resurrection was an abstraction, impossible to believe in the dark. But when Jesus speaks Mary's name, the resurrection becomes personal. Now Jesus speaks to her and her alone.

And in hearing her name, maybe Mary remembers something Jesus had once told her. He had said, "[The shepherd] calls his own sheep by name... they know his voice" (John 10:3,4).

In hearing her name, Mary is jolted out of her despair; the film is removed from her eyes. And suddenly, she is able to see. She is able to look beyond the cross, beyond death, and finally, she sees him. She sees Jesus, alive and resurrected. She shouts, “Rabbi!” She shouts because her world has changed; she believes.

This is the true miracle in our Gospel story today. It’s not when Jesus rises from the dead. That’s almost a footnote in the story. John writes, “She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus.” That’s how John introduces the risen Christ. No trumpets, no bright light. Just a man mistaken for a gardener.

The good news is not realized until God’s love and the triumph of eternal life become reality for Mary. Salvation takes place when the truth of the resurrection claims her life and becomes her personal truth. That is why the first proclamation of the gospel is not, “Jesus is risen”; it’s “I have seen the Lord.”

Serene Jones writes, “We do not want to be loved by some distant cosmic Lord... We want to be seen for who we are in the most intimate, far-reaching corners of our interior psychic lives... When Jesus says, ‘Mary,’ his words travel toward these most private places in her. Similarly, when he speaks to us through her, his grace travels into the most private places of our own lives. And when his words hit home there, in that name space, John’s Gospel tells us that Christ is made known.”

Today, God calls *you* by name.

We come here laden with our tombs of fear and pain, but we leave with God’s word in our ears, a name that says: “Do not be afraid. For I am with you—I, who have known and loved you your whole life. I have conquered death for you. I am your God.”

I want you to hear your name, because I have heard mine. I used to take pride in thinking that I had subjected my faith to every possible doubt and question. But last year, when Ezra and Leo died, my faith was shaken. For the first time in my life, I *needed* God and heaven to exist. I needed to know that the resurrection was real and that my sons weren’t just... gone. In the face of this dark and empty tomb, I needed more than an idea of God; I needed God.

On August 21, the day Ezra and Leo were supposed to be born, Jenna and I gathered at their burial blot, while the sun became dark with a total eclipse. I remember sitting, hunched over, in the grass, my glasses stained with tears, when I looked up and saw something that jolted me out of my despair. I saw in my mind’s eye two young boys, maybe eight years old, leaping and running toward me, with the biggest smiles you’ve ever seen plastered on their faces, calling out to me, “Papa!” I felt their arms reach around my shoulders, piling on top of me, laughing, and asking why I was crying. They said they were happy.

On that day, as the sunlight returned, I heard God call my name. I heard that the resurrection is real. I heard, “Papa!”

I don't pretend to understand what happened. All I know is that I heard what I needed that day to believe. I heard my name.

I hope you too hear your name today.

And when you do, may you say, to all those who still walk in the dark, who reside in locked rooms, that you have heard your name and seen the Lord.

Today, we do not simply say, "Jesus is risen!" We say, with Mary, "I have seen the Lord."
Amen.