

Isaiah 25:6-9

Acts 10:34-43

John 20:1-18

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

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Called by Name

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! This morning Christians from all over the world are gathered together to shout these joyous words of exclamation. Even though we are not together in the sanctuary and singing our favorite hymns, we still find great comfort in the familiarity of our ancient liturgies and heart-felt prayers with the assurance that Jesus lives. However, things could not have been more different on that first day of the Resurrection.

There is no brass fanfare. There are no shouts of joy. There are no fragrant lilies or pastel colored eggs nestled in Easter baskets. There is only stillness, darkness and great fear. Mary Magdalene is visibly shaken from the trauma of witnessing Friday's ghastly crucifixion. The disciples are hiding for fear they will end up like Jesus nailed to a cross. They are also harboring the awful shame of having abandoned their teacher, their friend. In fact, everyone is suffering as things seem pretty hopeless.

In the early morning mist Mary makes her way to the tomb where she witnessed Jesus' body being laid just two days before. Not a soul is around. It is eerily quiet just before the dawn breaks. In this half-light Mary strains to see the outline of the tomb through the shadows. Something is not right. She feels a knot of fear in the pit of her stomach as she gingerly steps a bit closer and realizes that the heavy stone that sealed the tomb has been moved, revealing a gapping, empty, dark void. Confused and terrified Mary runs to tell the disciples that the tomb is empty. The two race back to the tomb to find only the blood stained cloths that were gently wrapped around Jesus' limp and broken body after he was taken down from the cross. Bewildered by this shocking discovery the two men hurriedly retreat home.

Not so for Mary. Mary remains. What follows next is an intimate, deeply personal and wonderfully assuring telling of the first Easter.¹ This garden scene from John's gospel is beautifully grounded in our earthly humanness and our deep, deep need to be known and loved by God. Mary sees two mysterious, angelic figures who tell her Jesus is not there. Then out of nowhere a stranger approaches Mary. Looking straight into Jesus' eyes as she speaks she hasn't the faintest idea who this man is. Then, he says, "Mary!" At that very moment Mary recognizes Jesus for the first time. "Rabbouni!" she cries. Her heart is broken open and touched to its deepest depths at the sound of Jesus calling her by name, Mary. By sheer impulse Mary reaches out to touch Jesus but he tells her it is too soon. Instead, she must go and share what she has seen - that Jesus is alive. Mary hurries off and tells the other disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" With this one sentence the entire world is forever changed.

¹ Serene Jones, *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol. 2*, eds. David L. Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 376, 378.

We will never know what actually happened in the tomb that first Easter. But, we know a “holy mystery known only to God” took place in the darkness.² We also know that Mary wept real tears of grief over the unthinkable loss of her dearly beloved friend and teacher. We know that Mary was terrified and confused by the sight of that empty tomb. We also know that when Jesus called Mary by her name something miraculous occurred. Jesus said the one word that was meant only for Mary as an individual, as a friend and for no one else.³ When Jesus said her name everything in her world seemed to shift. Her terror, despair and anxiety evaporated like the morning mist. She was overwhelmed with sheer joy and elation. Mary had seen the Risen Christ. He is the promise and hope of a new life where we need no longer be afraid of living or dying because Mary herself has witnessed that love, not death, has the last say.

Theologian Serene Jones, reminds us that, “Like Mary, we long to be known by God, to be held in God’s gaze, to be seen by God as the object of God’s love and desire and care.”⁴ We yearn for God to truly know us for the unique person we have are – to know our wildest dreams as well as our darkest fears and deepest disappointments but also our hopes to live a life where we are loved, adored and know that our lives have value and count for something. We need God to know what makes our heart sing and what brings us to our knees. We need to know you and I matter to God.

When Jesus calls Mary by name, Jesus is calling each of us by name, too. Jesus is calling us to follow him and to live the life we were created for – the resurrected life where the evils of this world are vanquished forever by the power of God’s love. He knows this is not an easy path and that we struggle in all sorts of ways. He knows we are wounded and broken, much like Mary and the disciples were in those darkest hours before the dawn of Jesus’ Resurrection. No matter how dark the world may seem to you right now, no matter how overwhelming your struggles and doubts, or if you are aching to see a loved one who has died, you can be assured that just as the dawn breaks through the darkest of nights, the Risen Christ calls you by name to share in the hope of the resurrection.⁵

Several years ago a good friend shared that when her elderly mother died she was in great sorrow that she would never hear again the special name her mother called her. I remembered her comment when my own mother died six years ago. I realized with deep sadness that I will never be called by my nickname, a term of endearment, that only my mother used. However, in the hope of the resurrection, I know I will be called by that name again, not on this side of the grave but most assuredly on the other, because Christ is risen. He is risen, indeed!

Amen.

² Debie Thomas, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=1723>.

³ Jones, 378.

⁴ Jones.

⁵ Curtis Almquist, <https://www.ssje.org/2015/02/26/praying-holy-saturday/>.