

Easter Calls Your Name

By
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from the pulpit of
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Easter

Isaiah 25:6-9

⁶On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. ⁷And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. ⁸Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the LORD has spoken.

⁹It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the LORD for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

John 20:1-18

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.”

³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in.

⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself.

⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet.

¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.”

¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher).

¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

It seems especially appropriate this year that we meet up with the good news of Easter in the gospel's cemetery. We have lived through a long season where it sometimes feels like death has overtaken the world and some light has gone out. We were barely emerging from the pandemic when the war in Ukraine began; and now we've entered the third year of its brutality. Then last fall we became witnesses to the daily images of horror – first in Israel, and since in Gaza where there are not enough graves to bury the dead, including more than twelve thousand dead children. Now Haiti is going up in the smoke of gunfire again, and gun violence is not that far away. In 2023, the United States suffered over five hundred and sixty-five mass shootings. Last week when the Key Bridge collapsed into the Baltimore Harbor, one of my friends said, "I'm glad for an early Easter in March this year; it seems like we've been trudging through the valley of the shadow of death for a long time.

We have, and add to those news-worthy stories, our own personal losses of dear ones who have died. Wives and mothers; fathers and brothers; husbands, children and friends – and we have suffered a fair measure of loss and grief. We stand together in the cemetery this Easter morning -- looking for hope, hoping that life does indeed conquer death, and by God, trying to trust in the power of resurrection to transform the world.

Whatever grief or doubt, whatever prayer or longing you have brought with you, John's gospel makes room for everyone to find a place in this story of resurrection. If your heart is full of faith, deeply grateful for your steady trust in God, here you are! If you have come with the age-old question, "Can it possibly be true?" You are in good company here. If you've arrived with a bit of skepticism and wish there were more proof that the missing body was not a stolen corpse but a resurrected Lord, welcome to John's gospel. Everyone is invited here, because in John we have three disciples who have three very different experiences of resurrection.

It is amazing how people can see the same thing, hear the same thing, experience the same thing, and come away with totally different

perceptions of what has happened. A couple of friends leave a movie theater, and one says, “That movie had the perfect ending.” And the friend responds, “I didn’t understand it at all.” A pair of newlyweds purchase their first home in a quaint little urban neighborhood. Excited, they see fascinating, diverse neighbors and the beginnings of a community garden down the block. Their parents arrive to help them move in and see suspicious looking neighbors, the possibility of crime, and a nearby vacant lot filled with weeds.¹

The Innocence Project, dedicated to exonerating people who have been wrongly convicted of crimes has shown that eyewitness testimony contributed to seventy percent of the cases of wrongful conviction. Eyewitness testimony cannot be trusted, because people bring their internal world to events which affects what they see and experience. The court system has verified, and our own experiences confirm: human recollection is fallible; we carry internal bias that influences what we think and what we see, and it has been proven that stress impairs memory.

No wonder these first disciples who arrive at Jesus’ tomb experience resurrection differently. Can you imagine the stress that Mary, Peter and the Beloved Disciple were under after what they had witnessed on Friday, agonized over on Saturday, and were stunned to discover in the dark before dawn on Sunday morning? Three disciples. Three different experiences. One sees the grave clothes neatly folded and believes. One sees the same thing and there is no indication that he believes anything. One is surprised into believing by hearing the sound of her name. Three disciples. Three different experiences. One sees and believes, another sees and leaves uncertain, and one needs to hear her name spoken in love by a familiar voice.²

¹ Idea paraphrased from Martha Sterne, *Alive and Loose in the Ordinary*, p. 65.

² Barbara Lundblad, Commentary on John 20:1-18, 3/27/16.

Each of these disciples helps us find ourselves in the Easter story, and my guess is that every single one of us has some intersection with the ready believer, the uncertain skeptic, or the one who needs a more personal nudge to step over that thin line between Horrific despair and incomprehensible joy. So, here's the deal about discovering the joy in John's Easter proclamation. While we are trying to figure out which pair of disciple footprints best fits our Easter stance, it's not really about what we bring to the moment. It's about God coming to where we are; it's about Easter calling our name.

If we take a deep breath and try to let go of whatever stress we are carrying with us, let go of whatever stress might impair our memory, like Mary we will remember. Remember John started dropping clues about this Easter proclamation way back at the beginning, teaching us what to expect. Mary hears her name and recognizes Jesus, calling out *Rabbouni* which is a term of endearment, a personal way of saying, Rabbi – My Beloved Teacher. At the sound of her name, she must have remembered what Jesus had taught her - what Jesus has taught us in this gospel where God's words reveal deep meaning. The Word is in the Flesh. The Light is in the Darkness. The Wine was in the Water. Jesus is the Bread of Life. His Love is in the Vine which flows into us the branches.

Against all the grief and despair that the world dishes up on a daily basis, like Mary, we have been taught to experience the presence of God everywhere. And this is what he taught that really helps us understand resurrection's power today. At the very heart of the gospel, remember Jesus said:

I am the Good Shepherd.

The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

I call the sheep by name, and they know my voice.

The Risen Christ says, *Mary!* and she knows his voice. Mary says, *My Beloved Teacher*; and we remember what he taught us. The entire gospel is revealed – right there. The Word is in the Flesh, the Light is in the

Darkness, in the cemetery, Eternal Life, In the Life-giving Vine, Love.
In the Voice of the Good Shepherd Easter calls your name.

In a recent interview, a Ukrainian pastor named Ivan Rusyn talked about the constant terror and uncertainty of life just now in Ukraine. And he said the conflict has helped his church live into their vocation. The church has worked to meet people in their need, providing everything from food and fuel to a space to gather in lament and prayer. His people have discovered within themselves and among their community a generosity and grit that is astounding.

While he has helped nurture this living faith and spirit among the congregation, Pastor Rusyn is bold to say that he has agonized over unanswered prayers, over his sheer anger at the violence and suffering. But then he says something surprising. “I will follow even if I do not understand. Whatever is lost. Will I survive? Will my family survive? I will follow anyway, because somehow during this year, my relationship with God has become more real. He says he cannot explain it, but something has gripped him and his church. They are being transformed amidst their grief and in the face of the horror of evil, they have hope. I cannot explain it, he says, but it’s true. That future hope is changing our present life, and it’s real.”³ The only thing I know to call it is the power of resurrection.

Friends, we too have met the Risen Christ. We remember what he has taught us so that we can follow him. Follow him into the world of darkness, to take his light. Into a world of hunger to offer bread that really sustains life. Into a world where – God knows – there is too much violence and death, to show forth the power of his resurrection. The Risen Christ is calling your name, saying, do not hold on to me, but get moving, go tell and follow me as together We transform the world God so loves.

AMEN.

³ *Journal for Preachers*, Easter, 2023, quoted from *Plough* online interview.