

Called by Name
John 10:3; John 20:1-18 – Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020 – First
Congregational Church of Meredith, NH
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All of the gospels have an Easter story, of course, and all of them include Mary Magdalene. In the other gospels, she is at the empty tomb with other women, but in the Gospel of John, she comes alone. In the other Easter stories, Jesus doesn't appear at the empty tomb at all. Those gospels leave us with an empty tomb and a search for its meaning that is only later resolved when Jesus appears again. But in John, Jesus appears immediately to Mary Magdalene, right there in the garden. Matthew's Easter story is big and bombastic. The whole earth shakes when the angel rolls the stone from the tomb. The Gospel of John is usually focused on Jesus' cosmic significance. An earthquake would have made sense here. But we don't get an earthquake. Instead, John gives us this beautiful story that turns on this personal encounter between Jesus and Mary, and that is why it is my favorite of all the Easter stories.

Mary, grieving the loss of her dear friend Jesus, comes to the tomb and at once sees the stone has been rolled away. She makes the logical assumption that someone has taken Jesus' body – she imagines grave robbers maybe, or Roman authorities, or perhaps even Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who had "supposedly" buried Jesus after the crucifixion. Nicodemus, after all, was a Pharisee, and if he and Joseph were followers of Jesus at all, well, they were secret followers, people who didn't want to be openly associated with him. Should she have trusted them to see to Jesus' burial? Here is Mary, already learning to live in a world that doesn't have

Jesus in it, and now there is not even his body left to tend to, nothing of Jesus left to touch. It is a double grief, and it absolutely undoes her.

After the disciples leave the tomb, Mary sees Jesus, but she doesn't recognize him. She thinks he is the gardener, and – grasping at straws – she asks if maybe he moved Jesus' body for some reason. Nothing here is making sense to her. And then Jesus calls her name. "Mary." Just "Mary." And everything changes.

When you can't believe your eyes, sometimes you will believe your ears. I know you have seen dozens of news clips over the years of military parents surprising their kids at school when they return home from deployment. Sometimes the kids recognize their parent as soon as they walk through the door. But sometimes ... sometimes they have been living in a world where Dad is gone. Dad is not there for Cheerios in the morning or soccer in the afternoon or bedtime stories at night. It's just a different world from the one they lived in before Dad left. It takes a lot of energy to live in that Dad-less world and get through the day. So, without any warning, Dad walks through their classroom door, and they don't know whether to trust their eyes. But then Dad says, "Hey Ben, I'm home!"

It's that voice. There is no denying that voice. When that voice calls Ben by name, the whole Dad-less world dissolves into a new world in which Dad is home again. Ben bursts into tears, and Dad scoops him up in a great embrace, and we all wipe the tears from our own eyes as we watch. It is such an intimate moment, being called by name by the one you love, by the one you thought you had lost.

For two days, Mary has been living in a world without Jesus, a dangerous world where Jesus is dead and can't return, and if his body isn't in this tomb, then who can she trust anymore?

Many of you have suffered losses of those you loved, so you know: it takes a lot of energy to reconstruct your inner world to accommodate a loss like that. You start to say something to the one you have lost, and you have to catch yourself. I don't live in that world anymore. You imagine him walking into the room, and then you remind yourself that can't happen.

And so, when Mary sees Jesus in the garden, she doesn't believe her eyes. But that voice calls her name. "Mary." And the bitter, dangerous world she has been living in, the world where Jesus is dead, simply dissolves around her. She is living in a new world now, where Jesus is risen, where Jesus is here with her, a world where she can hear his voice again, saying her name. "Mary." The Bible tells us what happens next, but nothing else much matters. It is this moment, when she hears Jesus' voice, that changes everything.

We have all been living in a new and strange world these last few weeks, a dangerous world where we don't know what we can trust anymore. Things that seemed normal to us just a very few weeks ago could now be life threatening. We want to just dash to the store and pick something up, and then we have to catch ourselves. We don't live in that world anymore. We want to be with our friends and family, but that can't happen. It takes a lot of energy to keep our minds in this world, this world where so much has changed. We have to reprogram ourselves to use Zoom or to wait for the mail to arrive. We are exhausted from the very necessity of all this change.

But Jesus said his sheep know his voice, and we hear Jesus' voice calling our name, too. Because we are all beloved children of God. That voice is so familiar, so dear, so personal. When he just speaks our name, this whole new, bitter, anxious world dissolves away. In that moment, we are known to the depth of our souls by the one who spoke heaven and earth into being at the beginning of time, and we are safe in his arms. "Mary," Jesus calls. But not Mary only. Mark, too, and Annie, and Donnie, and Nancy, and Davy ... calling each of us by name into a new Creation, in which our anxious world dissolves away, a world where even Death cannot prevail. Like Mary, we are living in a new world now, where Jesus is not dead but is risen. Our Lord calls us, by name, to live in this Easter world, today and every day.

He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!