

Encounters with Jesus: When Jesus Speaks Your Name

John 20:1-18

[A sermon preached by the Rev. Stan Gockel at the First Presbyterian Churches of Portland and Decatur, Indiana on Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017]

I

Mary Magdalene is the “Mystery Woman” of the Gospels.

While she is better known than most of the disciples,
we really do not know that much about her.

While Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved (probably John) are part of this story of the resurrection in John 20:1-18,
clearly Mary Magdalene is the central figure.

The story begins with Mary and it ends with her.

All three of the persons mentioned—

Peter,

the disciple whom Jesus loved,
and Mary—

survey the empty tomb,

but only Mary Magdalene sees the two angels,
encounters the risen Christ

(mistaking him at first for the gardener)...

only she hears him speak her name...

only she receives his command to go and tell the good news to others.

II

Who was Mary Magdalene?

What do we know about her?

Her name tells us she was from Magdala,
a small town in Galilee.

Luke 8:1-3 tells us that she was part of a small band of women who traveled with Jesus and his disciples.

These women “had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities” (Luke 8:2), and so they were devoted to Jesus and supported his ministry financially.

In Mary's case, Luke says that seven demons had been cast out of her.

We don't know exactly what that means,
but we do know that she was with Jesus during his ministry,
and she was there at the end.

No doubt her presence with Jesus,
along with the other women,
was a cause of gossip.

Even to this day, Mary's relationship with Jesus arouses speculation and suspicion.

Mary has often been identified as the "woman of the city, who was a sinner,"
i.e. a prostitute, in Luke 7:36-50, who anointed Jesus' feet with ointment,
although there is no evidence for that in the gospels.

When novelists, film makers, and composers want to emphasize the humanity of Jesus,
the part that is subject to temptation,
Mary Magdalene becomes a readily available temptress.

So Andrew Lloyd Webber in the rock musical "Jesus Christ, Superstar" portrays Mary as a woman in love with Jesus who sings,
"I don't know how to love him."

Frances Taylor Gench, in her book *Encounters with Jesus*, says Andrew Lloyd Webber warped her thinking about Mary. She's not the only one!

Martin Scorsese, in his controversial film, "The Last Temptation of Christ," shows a dream sequence where Mary, a reformed prostitute, marries Jesus and has children with him.

And Dan Brown bases his best-selling novel *The DaVinci Code* on the totally fictitious and fanciful premise that for 20 centuries the Roman Catholic Church has been keeping the deep, dark secret of the marriage of Jesus and Mary and their offspring.

Which goes to show that with a good marketing plan it is possible to sell 80 million copies of just about anything!

And when we're not besmirching Mary's reputation,
or dreaming up conspiracy theories about her,
we are confusing her with Mary of Bethany,
the sister of Martha and Lazarus,
who anointed Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and wiped them with her hair.

At the very least we can say that Mary Magdalene was a marginal person,
a person whose demon possession,
whatever else it did to her,
made her an outcast from society,
the object of ridicule and scorn.

That probably did not change when she began to follow this itinerant preacher from Nazareth,
who himself drew more than his share of scorn and skepticism.

Mary Magdalene...mystery woman.

Whoever she was, she had been through hell before she met Jesus, and Jesus healed her.

So out of love and gratitude she followed him...
she stood at the foot of the cross as he was dying...
and it was she who came under cover of darkness to the tomb
early on that first Easter morning.

III

Mary arrives at the tomb and what she finds there comes as a surprise—
even a shock.

She sees that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance.

It doesn't dawn on her that Jesus is alive.

She makes the same assumption you or I would have made...
 that someone had removed the corpse,
 that the body of her dearest friend had been stolen.

Even in death they will not leave him alone, she thinks.

In her grief, she remains at the tomb after Peter and John make their investigation,
 shrug their shoulders,
 and go home.

Suddenly she is startled by two men, who are present in the tomb,
 one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had laid.

The gospel writer intends the reader to understand these two men as angels,
 as messengers sent from God who sit in the same places that the cherubim
 occupied on the Ark of the Covenant.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask.

And Mary, out of her grief and sorrow, answers,

**"They have taken away my Lord, and
 I do not know where they have laid him."**

Then Mary turns and sees a stranger,
 although it is a stranger who looks vaguely familiar to her.

This must be the gardener—maybe he knows where the body is.

He also says, *"Woman, why are you weeping? Who do you seek?"*

Jesus' first words in John were addressed to two disciples of John the Baptist:
 "What are you looking for?" (John 1:38)

Now Jesus speaks similar words to Mary:

“Who are you looking for?”

Again, Mary finds words welling up from deep inside her:

**"Sir, if you have taken him away,
tell me where he is, so that I may go and get him."**

And Jesus, in one of the most profound moments in all of scripture, speaks her name—**"Mary...."**

I wonder: How did Jesus speak Mary's name?

What tone, what inflection, did he use?

Was it the intonation of love and tenderness? *"Mary, I love you."*

Was it the cadence of caring and acceptance? *"Mary, I welcome you."*

Was it the clear accent of call and challenge? *"Mary, I summon you."*

Whatever the tone of Jesus' voice,
whatever the pitch or the timbre,
whatever the feelings that his voice communicates,
it causes instant recognition on Mary's part.

She knows that it is Jesus, and she cries out, "Rabbouni!"—"Teacher."

Her Lord has spoken her name...**"Mary"**...and in an instant all of life is transformed for this mystery woman of the gospels.

IV

I suggest to you today that there is a part of Mary in each of us.

Mary, the outcast,
the marginal person,
grief-stricken at the death of her Lord—
heard him speak her name,

and everything changed.

What's in a name? we ask.

And yet we are each aware of the importance of our name,
 and of a deep desire to hear our name spoken by someone who loves us,
 who considers us important,
 someone to whom we matter.

When I was in grade school, one of the things that always happened on the
 playground was the choosing up of sides for a baseball game.

The two best players would be named the captains,
 and they would select the teams.

I was never one of the captains (which tells you of my general lack of athletic
 ability).

So I waited, along with all the other boys (only boys played back then), to see
 when my name would be called
 (usually last)...to see if my name would be called.

And when my name was called, it was usually with hesitancy and reluctance as in,
 "Okay...I'll take Stan" ...
 something less than a sense of enthusiasm and welcome.

Many times since in a variety of situations I have waited to hear someone speak
 my name when it wasn't such a good thing,
 when I would have preferred not to be there.

All of us have had that experience.

Too often when we hear our name spoken ,
 it is less than a positive experience,
 less than the love, healing, and acceptance that Mary experienced.

When your name is called at the IRS audit office...
 when your name is called in traffic court...

when your name is called at the oncologist's office...
well, those are times when you wish your name wasn't being called.

We all want to be loved,
we all want to be accepted,
we all want to know we matter to others,
to our friends and loved ones.

That is the longing that Mary Magdalene had...
that you have...
that all of us have...
to hear our name spoken in ways that matter.

To hear, "Stan...Donna...Jim...Carol...Dave...Tom...Mary..."
and to have it really mean something—
to have it mean that you are loved and accepted,
to have it mean that who you are and what you do
really does matter to someone in this world.

Colin Harbach wrote in the *Upper Room* about the time as a child when he waited at the railway station to be picked up by his aunt, whom he had never met. He was going to spend the holiday with her, and he only had a picture of her.

"How would I find her in this bustling sea of people? Then I heard my name. That call was quickly followed by a smile and a hug from the aunt in my picture. I was somebody in that crowd.

"I imagine it was something like that for Mary from Magdala on the morning of Jesus' resurrection.....In the growing light, even angels seemed unconvincing. And then she heard the risen Jesus say her name: Mary!

"That is Easter. That is why Christ lived and died and rose again—so that each of us may know ourselves as deeply valued by God in the midst of the world's crowds."

V

There was a young boy named Philip who had been born mentally and physically challenged.

He was a happy child, but increasingly aware of the differences between himself and other children.

Philip was 8-years-old and attended Sunday school at a church, where he was part of a third-grade class that had nine other 8-year-olds.

The teacher of that class was a wise and caring man, who realized that because of his differences, Philip was not readily accepted as a member of the class.

So the teacher worked hard to build a sense of community and caring for all ten of the kids.

They learned and laughed and played together.

And they really did care about each other—
although, as you know,
8-year-olds don't ever say such a thing out loud.

On Easter Sunday the teacher had a wonderful plan for his Sunday school lesson.

Back when women still wore panty hose, there was a company called L'eggs whose panty hose came in a plastic egg.

Those plastic eggs were used in countless crafts projects in classrooms throughout the world!

Well, the teacher gave each child an egg and sent them out onto the church lawn to find a symbol of the new life of Easter.

They were to put what they found into the egg and bring it back to the room.

They would mix them all up,
and then share the surprises they found in each one.

Well, they did this, and it was wild.

The children ran all around the church yard,

gathering their symbols,
then returned to the classroom.

They all put their eggs on a table and the teacher began to open them.

He opened one, and there was a flower. They all ooh-ed and aah-ed.

He opened another and there was a little butterfly. "Beautiful," the girls all said, since, as you know, 8-year-old boys don't readily say the word "beautiful."

He opened another and there was a rock. And as kids will, some laughed and one said, "That's crazy! How's a rock supposed to be new life?"

But the smart little boy whose egg it was said,

"That's mine. And I knew all of you would get flowers and leaves and butterflies and stuff like that. So I got a rock because I wanted to be different. And for me, that's new life."

They all laughed, but then the teacher opened the next one,
and there was nothing there... the egg was empty.

The other children, as 8-year-olds will, said,

"That's not fair! That's stupid!...Somebody didn't do it right."

About that time the teacher felt a tug on his shirt,
and he looked down
and there was Philip standing beside him.

"It's mine," said Philip. And the children got on his case:

*"You don't ever do things right, Philip!
How can you be so dumb?"*

And Philip said,

*"I did so do it...I did do it...
It's empty--the tomb is empty."*

The class was silent.

It was a moment that could only be described as miraculous.

And from that moment on Philip was totally accepted by that group of 8-year-old children.

They took him in,
they cared about him, looked after him...
he was no longer an outcast,
he was set free from the tomb of his differentness.

The following summer Philip died.

His family had known since birth that it would happen,
for there were many things wrong with his tiny body.

On the day of his funeral, nine 8-year-old children,
with their Sunday school teacher,
marched up to the casket,
and placed within it **an empty egg**—
a symbol of the new life of Easter.

VI

What is Easter about?

Is it about some miracle that no one has ever been able to describe,
let alone understand? **YES!**

Is it about the bonds of death finally and forever being broken
so that we no longer have to fear death? **YES!**

Is it about hope in the midst of a hopeless world
and light breaking into the darkness? **YES!** All this and more.

But first it is about an empty tomb,
 and a garden,
 and Jesus encountering Mary Magdalene,
 speaking her name,
 loving her,
 welcoming her,
 accepting her,
 letting her know that she was important to him,
 and then giving her an important job to do.

Easter is when Jesus speaks your name!

He speaks our name, and because he loves us and cares for us,
 he gives us a job to do,
 an important job—
telling others that he loves and cares for them too.

VII

And Mary Magdalene,
 her tears of sorrow having turned into tears of joy,
 went and found the disciples and said to them,

"I have seen the Lord...He is alive."

Amen.

Sources:

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