



When Love Calls Your Name

TEXT
John 20:1-18

March 27, 2016 — Easter — Sermon by Rev. Jenny McDevitt — Friendship Hall — 9:30 a.m.

Early in the morning, on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, while stars still hung in the night sky ... that's where John begins this story. Of course he does. He knows resurrection does some of its best work in the dark. So that's where he begins: with Mary making her way to the tomb in the still, quiet dark.

And so before we go any further than that, I want to invite you to take a moment and think about why you have made your way here, early in the morning on the first day of the week. ... I want to give you a moment to think about that, because it seems possible that in all the chaos of actually getting here — getting everyone dressed and fed and out the door, making your way through Mission Road detours, navigating the parking lot and the shuttle bus and the hallways, finding a seat and finding the right bulletin to hold onto — I think it is possible that in the midst of all that chaos, you spent so much energy just *getting* here that you've forgotten why it feels so important to *be* here.

Now maybe you're here today because you are filled with eagerness and excitement, with Alleluias bursting from your

soul. That's the right reason to come to Easter. We need your witness and we need your voice to remind us that joy comes in the morning.

Or maybe you're here out of a sense of obligation; here because somewhere within you, it feels like you ought to be here; or here because someone sitting next to you feels like you ought to be here. That's the right reason to come to Easter. I think Mary made her way to the tomb out of obligation, too, burial spices in hand, not wanting to face the task before her but going anyway, simply because it needed to be done. Showing up is no small thing.

Or maybe you're here because you yourself feel buried by grief or brokenness, and hope feels like a foreign language in a faraway land, and the elusiveness of peace is just insult to injury. That's the right reason to come to Easter. Surely Mary carried sorrow and despair with her that morning, each step heavier and slower than the last.

Whatever reason brought you to Easter today, it was the right reason to come. The truth is, I think that all of us, no matter how we have made our way here, full of joy or ambivalence or brokenness or uncertainty, we

all have one question dancing around the edge of our hearts: "Is it true? Is it really true?"

We are so fragile when we ask this question. Most of the time, it's a question that comes with some amount of fear. Sometimes the question comes with fear that something is too good to be believed: Is it true that the longed-for child is finally on its way; that the job with a steady salary is really being offered; that forgiveness is really being extended? In those moments, we are asking: Is resurrection true?

But sometimes the question comes with fear that our worst suspicions will be confirmed: Is it true that the treatment isn't working; that the affair actually happened; that our loved one really has died; that hateful rhetoric has somehow turned into legislative reality? In those moments, we are asking: Is death winning?

Is it true? How could this be true? I suspect that question carries Mary all the way to the tomb, where a compassionate gardener asks her another question: "Why are you weeping?"

It's so important that we not miss this. These are the first words of resurrection, and they are not a statement of power or glory — they are an inquiry into the circumstances of a broken

heart. It is Easter morning, and having broken the power of death forever, Jesus issues no urgent proclamation. He asks a gentle question to a hurting soul: “Why are you weeping?” That is our introduction to what resurrection living looks like.

And then there is the smallest moment, and the shortest sermon ever recorded. “Mary,” he says. As best I can tell, that is when everything changes ... with one word. It isn’t just any old word, it’s her word — a word that captures and communicates the unique particularities of her life; a word that is as personal as they come. It’s her name. At the sound of her name, she turns. She recognizes him. And resurrection, for her, in that moment, becomes real and true.

Names can be so very important. When I was two and a half years old, my dad brought home a pair of rabbits. I immediately fell in love with them. My mother asked if I would like to name them. “Yes,” I said. “I want to name them You and Me.”

“You and Me? You mean Brenda and Jenny?”

“No. You and Me.”

“You mean Momma and Jenny?”

“No. You and Me.” And so it was that my first household pets were named after pronouns. The rabbit named Me was an independent sort of creature, but the rabbit named You loved to snuggle. You quickly became my favorite, and I would wander through the house carrying her.

One day my mom walked into the living room to hear me saying, over and over again,

“I love You, I love You, I love You!”

“Aww, thank you so much, sweetheart,” she said. “I love you, too.”

“Not you, Momma,” I said. “I was talking to the rabbit.” Names matter.

Names matter to Jesus too. Consider this: Way back at the beginning of John’s gospel, we hear how Jesus’ disciples come to follow him. Andrew brings his brother, Simon, to Jesus. Jesus has never met this guy before, but he takes one look at him and says, “You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Peter.”

If I understand it, when Jesus calls him by name, I think he is saying, “I know who you are. I know where you have come from, and who you have been.” And when Jesus calls him by a new name, I think he is saying, “I know who you are still capable of becoming, who you will one day grow to be.” I think he is saying, “There is a future for you.”

The next time Jesus calls someone by name, it is eleven chapters later, and he calls his friend Lazarus, who has been dead three days, to come out of the tomb. “Lazarus, come out!” he commands. And Lazarus walks out, still wrapped up in his graveclothes, but also wrapped up in new life.

And the next time he calls someone by name, it is Mary, standing in the garden, and it is Easter Day, and resurrection is loose in the world.

When Jesus calls us by name, it is not a casual moment. When

Jesus calls us by name, everything changes. The old life passes away, and new life emerges.

In 1961, James Baldwin published a collection of essays titled *Nobody Knows My Name*. One essay in particular documents Baldwin’s experience as an African American living in the dominant, white, American culture — a culture in which, he says, no one knows his name. To be known is to be given life, he says. To be unknown is to be left for dead.

Here is what I am becoming convinced of, more and more each day: Resurrection redeems the whole world ... one person at a time. I don’t know how it could be any other way because resurrection is made real to us when love calls our name and reaches right into our lives.

You see, when resurrection comes, it doesn’t come to fix the issue of hunger as much as it comes to Jackson, the little boy sitting on the corner of 18th Street and Troost, waiting as his mother panhandles for food. When resurrection comes, it doesn’t come to fix the issue of homelessness as much as it comes to Sylvia, who recently graduated from the Hillcrest Transitional Housing program.

When resurrection comes, it doesn’t come to fix the issue of inadequate health care as much as it comes to Finn, who died because his ventilator came unattached, and there was no attendant present to notice. And it comes to Anne, who is newly widowed because of this. When resurrection comes, it always calls a name, because that is how

God has chosen to work in this world — not in abstract concepts, but in actual, personal, human relationships. That is literally the story of Jesus' life, and of his resurrected life too.

Marilynne Robinson, an author I have quoted before, says it this way. She says resurrection “fractures the continuities of history,” which is a lovely way of saying, resurrection interrupts everything we have come to count on.

We can count on the certainty of death. Death gets its moment with us all. We can't deny that. But resurrection interrupts that moment and assures us that when death comes, it does not get the final word. Because love calls our name, and the love of God is stronger than all the death the world has ever dished out.

And because Jesus asks why you are weeping, and then calls your name, why are *you* weeping and then calls *your* name, resurrection comes to *you*, into your life, in the ways that you need it most. It is devastatingly intimate. And therein lies its power.

Whatever it is that haunts you or exhausts you, whatever it is that has broken you or hurt you, whatever the things are that feel so enormous there is no getting around them ... those things, on this day, are interrupted. On this day, they lose their power over you. Resurrection comes to you, because it is into all of *that* that the risen Christ calls your name. Resurrection looks into the deepest parts of our souls, sees everything that we have carefully hidden away there far

away from the light of day, and says, “I love you. Now, live.”

In one of my previous churches, I knew a man who grew up in a home with alcoholism and abuse. He made it through his childhood and worked as hard as he could to build a different sort of life. He intended to leave the past in the past. He married a kind woman. He raised his children well. He never drank any alcohol, not once. He erred on the side of gentleness and meekness and never raised a hand against another soul and never told another soul about all that had happened to him.

As his own children grew and left home, and as his parents grew old and died, he lived with his secrets and his shame quarantined — convinced that if he let them out, the sickness would infect everyone he loved. Finally, in his mid-60s, he realized he was so very tired. He walked into an Al-Anon meeting. “My name is Carter,” he said, “and I am the child of an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Carter,” they said back to him. And in that moment, he found the courage, in fits and starts, to tell them everything. He told it all, and the world didn't end. In fact, if you ask him, he will tell you that night is when his life finally began.

Resurrection happens, and it changes us. It saves us. The late Henri Nouwen wrote, “The resurrection is God's way of revealing to us that nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost. The risen Jesus reveals that God's love for us is

not just a quickly passing experience, but an eternal reality.”

Nothing that belongs to God will ever go to waste. What belongs to God will never get lost. Healing is always possible. New life is always finding a way. That is the story so compelling, we have told it four different times in the same book. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: four gospels, four accounts of Jesus' resurrection, the same story, and yet every one of them is different. They don't match up. The theme is the same, but the details are different — because the risen, enduring love of God comes to each of us in the ways and places we need it most. The story is always the same, and yet the story is always uniquely ours. Jesus Christ is risen today, and so we are risen today too.

Is it true? Is it true, or is it too good to be true? The way John tells it, that's a pretty personal question. So you know what? You tell me.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.