



Resurrection Calls You By Name

TEXT
John 20:1-18

April 1, 2018 — Easter Sunday — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Jesus called her name, Mary. That's when everything changed. That's when she began to imagine just how good God is.¹

She was in the garden where the tomb was now as empty as her own heart. She wasn't there to bring spices, as John tells it. That had already happened. She didn't have a job to do; she just needed to be there. There was a tugging in her heart that required her to stand in this empty garden, filled with both his presence and his absence.

And she wept. They kept asking her why she was crying. But you know why. She loved him. This is what love looks like in the face of death. If you have grieved, you know what that is like. Sometimes our tears come quietly, slipping from the corners of our eyes. And sometimes they come in torrents, with the force of a river that tosses our whole body around, as we sob. Mary wept.

For a moment, she thought he was the gardener. Most surmise she could not see him clearly, as her eyes were blurred by her tears. But I wonder if her tears were the reason she recognized him. The story turns on that. She wept because she loved him. He called her name because he

loved her. Apart from love, there is no intelligible way to speak of resurrection.

If you are here this morning wondering if you are the only one in the room who has questions about resurrection, well, you are not. Even the most faithful struggle to believe in resurrection all the time. We here at Village have owned that we are a people of belief and unbelief ... and that is as it should be.

Some ask, "Could God do this?" It is a question of God's power.

A decade ago, I got my kids a Christmas present; I was so excited. Turns out, I was the only one excited about this gift. It was a telescope. Sometimes on a clear night, I look through it, since my kids have no need of it. I'm not very educated about the night sky, but you don't need to know much to be filled with wonder. There are so many stars.

We don't really know how many stars there are. Scientists don't even know how many galaxies there are. Some estimate that there are between 100 and 200 billion galaxies. The closest galaxy to us is the Andromeda Galaxy, and it is 2.3 million light years away. A light year is the distance light can travel in a year. Light moves so fast that it

can circle the earth 7.5 times in one second.² So, in a year it can travel a long way!"³ The most distant galaxies are 13.5 billion light years away. Which means for some stars, the star actually died millions of years ago, but the light is just getting to us now.

The smallest galaxies include 100 billion stars. Larger galaxies might include a trillion to maybe 10 trillion stars. So, astrophysicists now estimate there may be as many as 300 sextillion stars — that's a 3 with 23 zeros after it.⁴ Some suggest that estimate is low. That's a lot of stars.

If that is not mind-boggling enough, in his book *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry*, Neil deGrasse Tyson says, "In the beginning, nearly fourteen billion years ago, all the space and ... matter and ... energy of the known universe was contained in a volume less than one-trillionth the size of the period that ends this sentence."⁵

Now you may think that creation is an accident, but I believe creation is an act of a loving creator, a God who wanted all of this to be. And if God can do that, I think God can work resurrection. But the mechanics of resurrection has never been the biggest question. The true question of faith is not *can God*, but the big-

ger question is *why*? Why would the God of 300 sextillion stars choose to resurrect you or me?

This text is about why. It is a testimony to the goodness of God. Jesus calls her by her name and everything changes.

There is something basically human in being known and named. We clump together on the elementary schoolyard while Danny Martin and Frank Chambless pick teams for kickball. “OK, I’ll take Are,” one of them said. “Oh good,” I think.

Every now and then the phone rings, and I hear, “Hey, Dad.” That’s the best. That’s my name too.

We want to be known. It’s not about being famous, that’s something else altogether. It’s about being loved. That’s what it is.

It was love that crawled down Mary’s cheeks, and when Jesus said, “Mary,” it was a word of knowing, and a word of love.

Resurrection is not a generic theological truth; it is an act of God that calls you by name.

This is what we know of love: Love doesn’t live in the abstract. Love only breathes in particular relationships. We don’t love in general; we only love particular people with stories and characteristics and names.

Kate Bowler teaches at Duke Divinity School. She is in her mid-30s and is dying of cancer. She knows there is no generic love, because there is no generic life. Of herself she says, “I am excellent in the stern of a canoe, but I never got the hang of riding my bike with no hands. I have seen the northern lights. ... I love the smell of

clover and chamomile because my sister and I used to pick both on the way home from swimming lessons. I spent weeks of my childhood riding around on my bike saving drowning worms after a heavy rain. My hair is my favorite feature even though it’s too heavy for most ponytails, and I still can’t parallel park. ... I am the mother of a little boy who loves trucks. There is no life in general.”⁶

And there is no love in general. Love always comes with a name.

She thought he was the gardener, until he says, “Mary.” In that moment, everything changed. He didn’t just come back from the dead; he came back *to her* because he couldn’t stand to be away. That’s when everything changed, and she was left to imagine just how good God is.

If I understand the text, the reason there is resurrection is because there is a holy love that calls you by name — a love that will never let you go. The God who fashioned 300 sextillion stars loves with an unwavering, undying, particular love that calls you by name.

Bill was my friend from a former congregation. His son Billy said he was in the Battle of the Bulge, but Bill would never talk about that.

Bill and Evelyn were married shortly after the war. They were high school sweethearts. When he came back, they were married in the church and had a reception in the same Fellowship Hall they had used for Youth Fellowship every Sunday night they were in

high school. Bill worked in insurance. They raised two children.

By the time I met them, they lived in a Presbyterian home — he in assisted living, she in memory care. Whenever I visited them, I would always find Bill in her room. He would tell her stories about a life she could no longer remember, about children she no longer recognized, about a husband who had loved her from across the ocean and back.

I stopped in one day. He was reading; she was resting. My arrival awakened her. I introduced myself again. She said, “Nice to meet you.” Then, pointing to Bill, she said, “Have you met this nice man?”

“Yes, I have,” I said.

After a visit, he followed me into the hall. I said, “Bill, I can only imagine how sad this is. Tell me, why do you come?”

“I understand, Tom. I know she doesn’t remember me. I don’t come because she might remember me; I come because I can’t forget her. I just can’t stay away. It’s the only place I know to be.”

I think resurrection is like that. God just can’t stay away, so God grants death no power to pull you from God. For when death comes, God could not stand for us to be lost, so God will raise you up to be with God.

The love of God calls you by name. It was true for Mary. It was true for Evelyn, and a little over a year later, for Bill. It’s true for those we have remembered in this sanctuary in recent months: for Rick and for Sally; for Dianna and Curtis and Ann; for Marilyn and Teddy; for Norma, Bill and Cindy; for Doug and Matt and

Kathleen; for all those you carry in your heart today, as well as for you and me.

The God who fashioned 300 sextillion stars knows you by name and loves you with a love that will never let go. That's just how good God is, and that is why, when the time comes, you can trust that the resurrection will call you by name.

¹I am grateful to Jon Walton for this insight. He shared it in a paper presented to the Moveable Feast in Princeton, New Jersey, in January 2018. As much as anyone I know, Jon has approached resurrection with an honest heart.

²Earthsky.org, "How Far Is a Light Year?"

³Traveling at 186,000 per second, light travels 5.88 trillion miles in a year.

⁴These numbers are all estimates, and estimates can vary widely. I have taken these numbers from Huffingtonpost.com, "Number of Stars in the Universe Could Be 300 Sextillion: Triple the Amount Scientist Previously Thought"

⁵Neil deGrasse Tyson, *Astrophysics for People in a Hurry* (2017), p. 17

⁶Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason* (2018), p. 125

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 website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.