

Easter Day B 2015  
April 5, 2015 :: John 20:1-18  
Fr. Jim Cook

## *“He’s Calls to Us Each by Name.”*

**T**his morning’s reading from John’s Gospel picks up right where we left off on Good Friday. Jesus has been crucified. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea have taken the body of Jesus and prepared it for burial. And, finally, the lifeless body of Jesus was placed in a sealed tomb.

That was Friday, during the late afternoon. Now it’s Sunday morning. It’s early, before dawn, and Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb.

What’s interesting about Mary Magdalene is that, although she’s a familiar character to us modern Christians— and that’s probably because of books like *The Da Vinci Code*— but in the context of John’s Gospel, she’s a relative late-comer to the scene. In fact, John mentions her on only one other occasion in his Gospel: Mary Magdalene is one of the women listed as having remained with Jesus as he was dying on the Cross. Even after nearly all of the other disciples have abandoned Jesus, Mary stays with him until the end.

And here she is again, on Easter Sunday morning. We can only guess why she’s there; but it’s probably for the same reason people have always gone to cemeteries and graveyards: to sort things out; to be near their loved-ones; to try to some sense of an unexpected death. But whatever the reason, when Mary comes to the tomb it is dark.

The Gospel of John likes to play with themes, like day versus night, and light versus dark; where darkness and night will symbolize confusion, fear, misunderstanding, doubt, or disbelief. And where day and light symbolize just the opposite.

So, when Mary comes to the tomb, early on that first Easter Sunday morning, she is quite literally *and* figuratively in the dark. However, even though it is dark, she can see well-enough to realize that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. And her first thought is not “He’s been raised!” but rather “His body has been stolen!” So, she runs off to tell Peter and John.

In a weirdly described early-morning footrace, Peter and John rush to the tomb. And when they arrive at the tomb, the darkness of night is just beginning to give way to the first light of day. They see the burial cloths. And, yes, the tomb is empty. But *their* first thought is not “His body has been stolen!” but rather “He’s been raised!” However, not knowing what to do next, Peter and John simply return to their homes.

Now, if that was the essence of the Easter message — that the tomb was empty and Jesus had been raised — it would be enough. It would be enough because everything that Jesus *said* would take place *has* taken place. He said he would die, and he did. He said he would be raised, and he was. And therefore, the teachings of Jesus, and his ministry, and his proclamations, have all been affirmed. And Jesus has finally earned the right to strut around the barnyard, kick up some dust, and tell people: “I told you! I am *SO* the Son of God! Suck it, Pharisees! In your face, Pilate!”

If that was the sum total of the Easter story, it would be enough, because it would be a redemption story. And who doesn’t love a redemption story? You know what I mean: Our home-town boy grows up and makes a name for himself. But when the people in power don’t like all the attention he’s getting, or the things he’s saying and doing, they trump up some charges against him, and pay off some people to testify against him, and they manage to get our boy executed. But, lo and behold, just a few days later, our boy rises from the grave. “Wow! What do you know? He was right all along!”

It’s a classic redemption story. And if our gospels only went as far as the empty tomb, it would be enough. But that’s not all there is to our story, because the God who raises the dead back to life has something else he wants to do.

We get a hint of what that might be, earlier in John’s gospel, when Jesus said this about himself:

“I am the good shepherd, and I lay down my life for my sheep. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. I call my sheep *by name* and lead them out. And my sheep follow me because they know my voice” (John 10).

And so, on Easter Sunday morning, after they’ve discovered the empty tomb, Peter and John have gone home, but Mary Magdalene lingers at the tomb. Again, we aren’t told why Mary lingered at the tomb, but we can make an educated guess.

In that culture women were denigrated as second-class citizens, and viewed them as the property of their fathers or husbands, and for women life could be anything but safe and secure. But perhaps, Mary found in Jesus someone who treated her as an equal, who made her feel appreciated, who valued her contributions, and in whose presence life could actually be satisfying and fulfilling. And when you find someone like that, you don't quickly or easily let them go. So, Mary Magdalene lingers at the empty tomb.

Finally, she looks into the tomb, and sees two men in there, but doesn't know they're angels. "Where is his body?" she asks the two men. Then she turns around and sees a third man, but doesn't know that it's Jesus. "Where is his body?" she asks the third man.

Now, I want y'all to pay attention, because it's at this point where our gospel story — our Easter Story — moves well beyond just being a redemption story.

"Where is his body?" she asks the stranger. But when the stranger calls to her *by name*, "Mary," she finally recognizes him. And the sun has finally risen in Mary Magdalene's dark world.

You see, in the Bible, names are more than just a convenient handle or label we can use to identify someone. To know someone's name is to know more than just *who* they are. Often it means to know *what* they are; the good and the bad; the stuff they're proud of and the stuff they're ashamed of; are all gathered together in a person's name. Therefore, for one person in the Bible to call to another person "by name" is a way of expressing your acceptance of them; it's a way to embrace a person just as they are.

Now the specific thing that transpires between Jesus and Mary usually gets missed, because it takes place at the level of the original Greek and Hebrew of our text, but this is what happens: All throughout our Gospel reading, whenever the author of John's Gospel would reference Mary Magdalene, he would use the Greek version of her name, *Maria*. However, at that moment by the tomb, when Jesus calls to her by name, John's Gospel uses the Hebrew version of Mary's name: *Mariam*. And he does so because the author of John's Gospel wants us to know that something special — that something precious and dear — has just transpired between Jesus and Mary. And when Jesus calls out to her, in that moment, he is using her "real name."

I don't know why Mary couldn't recognize Jesus when they first met by the empty tomb. But when Jesus called to her by name — when Jesus said, in effect, “Mary, I accept you, and embrace you, just as you are, and right where you are” — for Mary, suddenly everything got pushed aside. And in that brief moment by the empty tomb, for Mary there were only two people in the universe.

If the empty tomb is a story about redemption, then the story of Mary and Jesus *by* the empty tomb is a story about reconciliation. And Mary can finally rush off to tell the disciples “I have seen the Lord!” because in that brief moment by the tomb, when Mary encountered Jesus — when he considered everything about her — in the end, the verdict was love.

And so, in the end, the story of Easter *is* a story about redemption, *and* it's a story about reconciliation. But why should we care? What does all this mean to people like you and me?

Well, do you remember that passage I read earlier where Jesus described himself as the Good Shepherd? Well, what happens when one of his sheep decides to wander off? The Good Shepherd goes off after it. He leaves the rest of the flock behind without a second thought. He doesn't include in his deliberations “the needs of the many” versus “the needs of the one.” Nor does he conclude that a sheep dumb enough to wander off gets what they deserve. No, he just goes, and he searches, until he finds that one lost sheep. And he does so because he knows that only in his presence can we reach our fullest potential; that only in his presence can life be truly satisfying and fulfilling.

The world is not always a happy and safe place, and there is much darkness in this world. But with God there is light. But for God, there is more than our safety and security at stake. God *wants* us to be with Him, because God's heart is irrevocably drawn to us. God loves us; he can't help it. He probably even has our photo tucked away in his wallet. And in so many ways, and through so many parables and teachings and sermons, Jesus tried to explain that to us. But it took the Cross for people to take him seriously, and it took the Empty Tomb for people to believe it was true.

In the end, the Easter story *is* one of redemption *and* reconciliation. But, even though we celebrate Easter Sunday only once each year, in the Episcopal Church the official position is that *every* Sunday is a type of “little Easter.” But, in truth, *every day* is Easter for the people of God. Because, everyday, someone is feeling lost and alone; everyday someone is suffering or in pain; everyday someone is in danger or despair. And in those times, God may seem to be very

far away. But for every one of those people, everyday is Easter because God is calling to them, and God is searching for them, and God is reaching out to them; *and* to us.

And he calls us each by name.

Amen.