

Easter
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First Congregational United Church of Christ
John 21: 11-18
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John 21: 11 -18

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

SERMON

It's Easter and spring is in the air, and so, being the direct descendant of Abner Doubleday, my thoughts naturally turn to...Baseball. After reading this morning's text last week, one memorable game came to mind. It happened 33 years ago. I was a seminarian and playing shortstop for the Pilgrim Church softball team aptly named, *Saints and Sinners!*

It was a glorious summer afternoon for a ball game and all was well with the world... until the umpire was suddenly called away to a family emergency. In response, the two teams nominated the double on deck player to call the balls and strikes for batters on their own team...a fateful decision.

In the top of the first, my mentor and pastor of Pilgrim Church, the Rev Kenneth Powell, was doing his best to call balls and strikes while I was at the plate. I felt for Ken. I could feel his frustrations as he did his best to call pitches with trajectories that resembled a bell curve. Then, a rising fear pushed all other concerns aside because the opposing pitcher, a strapping young man from the local auto body shop, was quickly becoming enraged by the calls of my colleague.

With each call that didn't go his way the young pitcher would scream obscenities at the top of his lungs...twice he charged the plate when Ken made particularly egregious errors of judgment. It was tense to say the least!

Finally, and with some relief, I connected and grounded out to end the inning. But, taking the field I noticed with no small amount of concern that the still fuming pitcher was making his way up to the plate with his extra-large Louisville Slugger. With one swing he laced a single inches over the head of Ken who was playing first base.

Cursing under his breath, the pitcher, now runner, menacingly made his way down the base path and upon arriving at first, stomped on the bag for good measure, and turned to glare at Ken, his hated nemesis, who stood a mere 5 feet away.

The air was thick with tension, because like me, many assumed that in the heat of the moment an attack was imminent.

Instead we witnessed a miracle. Because, as time stood still and while the young man glared, Ken offered a warm greeting, "Hi Bill. Good day for a game don't you think?"

Suddenly, the scales of self-righteous anger fell from Bill's eyes, revealing his arch-enemy to be the local pastor who officiated at his cousin's wedding, where Bill stood as Best Man, a few month earlier.

To my relief and astonishment, I watched as the young man's face was quickly transformed from raging bull to compliant lamb. Then, with hands outstretched in a pleading gesture he reached out to Ken crying, "FATHER!"

Which in the Bostonian dialect is the translation for "Rabboni!"

Sometimes hearing one's name spoken in love strips away hatred and anger, and even deep pain and anguish to reveal clearer vision and one's truest self.

Mary turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

I love this passage. It is such a human story.

Commentator, Serene Jones, reflects that, "The scene between the two of them is visceral, emotional, and deeply, deeply personal. As such, it presses us to consider ways in which our faith in Easter's Jesus—even if we never actually observe a dead man rise—must be real and physically grounded as that garden scene was for Mary."

For us progressive Christians, that is a tall order, but not an impossible one. If we look at the character of Mary's dawning faith, we find clues to its nature. According to John, she looks the gardener in the eye, listens to him speak, and still does not recognize her beloved teacher whom she spent years following and admiring. Her sight dimmed by the depth of her grief and fear.

Then, maybe when her back is turned, he says, "Mary," and the gentle sound of his voice helps her to see him. He does not offer a general address, no, he uses a word that applies to her and her alone, a word that captures the utter particularity of her individual life, her name, in love."

This, too, tells us much about how we know God and how we are known. Like Mary, we long to be known by God, to be held in God's loving gaze, to be seen by God as an object of God's love and desire and care.

That is why we are here in this community of faith on this glorious Easter Sunday. Through our senses we seek the spirit of Jesus...to be in the space where we physically, emotionally, collectively experience the revelation of Jesus in our mist, in the familiar sounds of a favored hymn that stirs us in places too deep to be named, in the gentle song of a child's laughter that reminds us that we are all beloved children of God and so very precious, in the embrace of an old friend or the smile of a new one that reminds us that we need not be alone for this journey.

The great preacher, Fred Craddock tells the following story about his family. "My mother took us to church and Sunday school; my father didn't go. He complained about Sunday dinner being later when she came home. Sometimes the preacher would call, and my father would say, "I know what the church wants. Church doesn't care about me. Church wants another name. Right? Isn't that the name of the game? Another name, another pledge." That's what he always said.

Well, one time he didn't say it. He was in the veteran's hospital, and he was down to 73 pounds. Years of smoking led to a terrible case of throat cancer. They put in a metal tube to replace what they had to remove and X-rays burned him to pieces. I flew in to see him. He couldn't speak, couldn't eat. I looked around the room, potted plants and cut flowers on all the windowsills, a stack of cards twenty inches deep beside his bed. And even that tray where they put food, if you can eat, on that was a flower. And all the flowers beside the bed, every card, every blossom, were from persons or groups from the church.

He saw me read a card. He could not speak, so he took a Kleenex box and wrote on the side of it a line from Shakespeare. If he had not written this line, I would not tell you this story. He wrote: "In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story."

I said, "What is your story, Daddy?" And he wrote, "I was wrong."

That is why we come to church. To be in this sacred space to listen for our name, to calm our anxious worries, and remind us again that grace is not an object to be known but a gift to be lived... and shared. Therein lies the key to our Easter faith, it is to be shared.

How, I wonder, would the world be different if we endeavored to call out to others in a way that assured them that they were known, accepted, valued, and even loved. Is it not now our charge, our time to follow the example set for us by Jesus at the tomb?

Friends, I don't need to remind you that this world is filled with terrible crimes of injustice and hatred, that its people are too often victimized by greed and the power mongers, and that our lives are too often torn apart by acts of senseless terror. Everyday fear has a grip on our world.

But, there is hope. "Do not be afraid," we are told. Today, we can be part of that promise.

Today, we are challenged, indeed we are called, to see all our brothers and sisters as they are—broken but beloved children of God—to see them, truly see them, and to call out to them by name.

Some time ago, I spoke to a nurse who told me a story that resonated with this truth. In our conversation, she admitted that nurses of her trauma unit looked to the summer with some dread, and some judgment. The long, warm summer nights provided ample opportunity for all kinds of nefarious activity in the Inner City. The patients in the ICU beds at that time of year were often young people who

ended up there as a direct result of some very poor choices. So, blame and judgment were often unwanted visitors on the floor. As such, there was always the danger that some of that judgment might creep into the care given to these injured ones and their families. It should not have been so, but there it was.

One day, this nurse found herself in such a situation. The patient was a young gang member who had been shot in the midst of a drug deal. In he came bleeding, in agony, and critically injured with a roll of \$5,000 in the pocket of his jeans. "Probably a dealer," the staff suspected. Luckily, with great effort the patient was stabilized, he would live. Three others from that encounter would not.

And now, of course, family, friends, perhaps fellow gang members began to arrive. She reflected that day to me, "As you can imagine," she said, "it was a pretty rough crowd. The mood in the waiting room was tense, to say the least. There was so much pain and there were so many walls between visitors and staff; walls of fear and judgment, walls of anger and racism, walls that hid our humanity from one another. It was so hard"

"I knew I had a choice," she went on to say, "I could choose the way of judgment, and fear, and hardness of heart, it would have been easy given the circumstances, instead, I decided to look, truly look at my patient, and his loved ones, and to see them as beloved children of God."

Not knowing who she was in the small crowd in the waiting room, I called the mother's name, "Maria." Forward she came. Our eyes met, a common bond was shared, no longer strangers, just mothers.

"Good evening Maria, let's go to your son," and together arm and arm we made our way to his bedside.

There is an old Scandinavian proverb: "In every person there is royalty. Address the royalty and royalty will respond."

Such was the way of Jesus. I think that was how he spoke to Mary on that day by the tomb when he called her by name. In that touching moment and in the hour of her greatest grief she recognized him and felt the embrace that is God's gift of grace.

A gift exchanged some two thousand years later in a hospital room in the heart of the inner city. So friends, let us as God's broken, yet beautiful and beloved children, offer that same gift to all of our brothers and sisters, the voice of valuing, the sound of love.

For each of us have been called by name.

Let us pray: Outcast God, born into poverty in an occupied land, driven from your home as your family fled violence, living alongside the marginalized and the oppressed. Dying between criminals to the jeers of the crowd, help us to listen now for our name. Open our eyes, that we who seek to follow you may recognize your face in the faces of those who feel judged and alone. Open our ears, that we who seek to hear your word may recognize the power of your love in the stories, which are often forgotten.

Open our hearts, that we who seek your way of life may be bold in witnessing to your longing for justice and peace. Amen