

A Question and a Word (John 20:1-18, Easter A)

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First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: [www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-question-and-a-word/](http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/a-question-and-a-word/)

In a few weeks, families will fill bleachers, stadiums, and auditoriums across the country, ready to cheer on their graduates. Whether high school or college, it is a day of celebration and pride as their beloved person walks across the stage, trying not to trip or forget which hand receives the diploma. All of it followed by their three seconds of fame as their name is announced over the PA system.

At my high school graduation, we lined up at the end of a ramp leading to the makeshift stage on the football field of Atkins Stadium. Before walking up the ramp to receive our diploma, we handed a card with our name on it to the announcers' table. If they had a question about pronouncing your name, they'd ask. The guy before me had an unusual last name, and when he said it, the announcer made some marks on the notecard to ensure he got it right. Thankfully, my name is easy. There were no questions or notations. Moments later, I walked across the stage as I heard "Melissa Hatfield" echo throughout the stadium, followed by deafening decent applause.

The announcers knew the importance of a name. Because names matter. A name means something. It means something to those in the stands. It belongs to a person they love, a person they know, and with whom they share a history. It means something to the graduate who hears their name called over the PA or yelled from the crowd. It means even more when they recognize the voice shouting their name. The voice that has said their name a million times over the years, a voice that says I know you, I know where you've been, I know what it took to get here.

Research has found hearing your name literally causes a chemical reaction inside your brain. Feel-good hormones, such as dopamine and serotonin, are released into your brain when your ears translate that your name has just been said aloud. This burst of excitement makes people happy and sends unconscious, positive signals to the brain.<sup>1</sup>

And sometimes, hearing our names has the opposite effect. It might be that we don't like the name, or it no longer fits us. Perhaps our name is associated with a past that feels like another lifetime. Or maybe the voice saying our name is a voice that has harmed more than encouraged. Regardless of good associations or bad, hearing our name has power.

It did for Mary of Magdala. Mary, set free from years of pain and demons by Jesus. Mary, who found hope in Jesus and his teachings. Mary, who traveled with the Lord and helped provide financially for Jesus and the ministry. Mary, who is known as the apostle to the apostles in some faith traditions. Mary was her name.

Mary Magdalene, whose name has wrongly been associated throughout church history with prostitution even though the scriptures say no such thing. Mary, who lived in a world and culture where systems pushed her to the margins and silenced her because of her gender. Mary was her name.

Mary, who had witnessed her teacher, friend, and Lord brutally tortured and killed days before. Mary, who stood faithful at the cross, even as most other disciples, abandoned Jesus in fear. Mary, who had come early in the morning, while it was still dark, only to find the tomb open and empty, adding to her profound grief. Mary, who lingered in the garden, looking for any sign of the friend and teacher she had lost.

Mary was her name, and Jesus forever changed her. They had a history. He had forgiven her, healed, loved, and restored her. Jesus knew who she was. He saw her when others did not. He included her in his ministry, valued her, and entrusted her with this new thing he was doing. And now? Now, Mary stands weeping outside the tomb, his tomb.

Can you imagine her sadness and grief? Devastated by this seemingly cruel and common act of grave robbery. Heartbroken that she will never hear Jesus say her name again. She went to the tomb that early morning to grieve. Mary didn't go there to hope. And even when signs of hope were right in front of her, she could not see beyond her grief until a question and a word.

Why are you weeping?

According to the Gospel of John, this question is the first word of resurrection, and they are not a statement of judgment, frustration, or impatience. It is a gentle question to a hurting soul: Why are you weeping?

It should not surprise us that Mary doesn't recognize the Risen Christ, mistaking him for a garden caretaker. We miss seeing Jesus all the time. In her grief and desperation, Mary boldly answers his question: If you have carried my Lord away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.

And then the shortest sermon ever is recorded. One word. "Mary." All the noise of Mary's despair, her fear, her worry that the body of her Lord was missing, the call of her name silences her shattered hopes and expectations.

Jesus could have said anything or done anything. I mean, he just defeated death itself. But he simply responds with her name, and everything changes. It isn't just any word; it's her word, her name. The voice that has said her name a hundred times, a voice that called her out of the darkness before, a voice that says I know you, I know where you've been, I know what it took to get here. I know you, Mary.

At the sound of her name, she turns and recognizes him. And resurrection, for her, becomes real and true at that moment. She had asked this man to tell her where her Lord was, and with one word, he answered her. "Mary. I am here."

Mary persisted, even in her grief and disbelief. She sought the Lord's dead body and encountered the Living Christ instead.

Why are you weeping? What darkness are you experiencing this morning that makes seeing hope in front of you difficult? Are you grieving over broken or strained relationships? Are you anxious about your life, kids, job, or health? Do you doubt whether you are enough for everyone that needs you? Are you angry over injustice and broken systems? Are you exhausted from putting on a brave face or hiding how things are and how you feel? Are you afraid that no one sees you and worried that if they did, they wouldn't, couldn't really love you? Are you done with looking for hope only to be disappointed yet again?

When we gather the courage to come in the darkness of our lives and sit outside the tomb of our buried hopes and dreams, when we confess the pain behind our tears, when we ask boldly for what we are looking for, don't be surprised to find Jesus standing right in front of you, calling your name.

Mary Ann Bird was born in Brooklyn in 1928. Mary Ann had it rough growing up. Born with a cleft palate and a disfigured face, Mary Ann also had lopsided feet, which affected her walking. Naturally, she was the target of all the school-age cruelty the other children could muster. Mary Ann lived in a dark world and wrote in her memoir entitled *The Whisper Test* that she was convinced that no one outside her family could love her.

That changed in the second grade when she was in Mrs. Leonard's class. Mrs. Leonard was short, round, happy, and kind. Back in those days, teachers were required to administer a type of homespun hearing test. The teacher would call each student up to her desk, have the student cover first one ear and then the other, and the teacher would whisper something to see if the child could hear. Usually, the teacher would say simple things like "The sky is blue" or "You have on new shoes today." Well, Mary Ann dreaded this test because she was also deaf in one ear, and so this test would be yet another chance for her to be singled out for her deficiencies in life.

On the day of the test, Mary Ann shuffled forward when it came time for her turn. She covered up her bad ear first, and then, as Mrs. Leonard leaned in close, Mary Ann heard words that would change her life. Because for Mary Ann's hearing test, Mrs. Leonard whispered, "I wish you were my little girl, Mary Ann." And through those words and during her darkness, Mary Ann heard the voice of Jesus, the voice of love, the voice of grace. And it changed her. Mary Ann grew up to become a teacher and shined with kindness and grace for her students. And it started when Mary Ann heard Jesus call her name through the voice of a middle-aged teacher.<sup>ii</sup>

This morning, Jesus leans in close and whispers your name. And when Jesus calls us by our name, and we turn and recognize it is the Risen Christ, everything changes. Resurrection becomes true for us just as it did for Mary that dark morning. She no longer stood weeping. She ran, proclaiming, “I have seen the Lord!” That is what makes us Easter people: carrying forth the hope of the Resurrected Christ, singing our alleluias, and telling our stories, even while it is still dark.<sup>iii</sup>

At the Hollywood Presbyterian Church years ago, the pastor was doing a Children’s sermon on Easter morning, and he asked the children, “What do you suppose was the first thing Jesus said to his disciples after he was raised from the dead?” One little boy leaped to his feet, flung his arms wide, and declared, “TADA!”

It’s a funny story, but the truth is that Jesus didn’t do grand displays of TADA when he appeared to people after his resurrection. He didn’t fling open doors, yelling, “I’m baaaaakk!” Instead, Jesus quietly appears in their lives. From behind the weeping Mary. Along the Emmaus Road as he walked with the deeply disheartened disciples. Standing on the beach, tending a little campfire, offering fishing advice to the disciples who do not recognize him.

It is in quietness and understated ways that Jesus assures us he is alive now and for eternity. That is where people that first Easter found Jesus to be alive in their lives. And this is where we’ll find him alive, too.<sup>iv</sup>

- We find him alive in caring teachers who whisper kind words to their students.
- We see him alive in friends who gather outside the emergency room with a hurting family.
- We find him alive in volunteers at the shelter who stay up all night so unhoused neighbors can get a good night’s sleep.
- We find him alive in the 45 of you who adopted a grand person through our church.
- We see him alive in our Ukrainian brothers and sisters who faithfully minister and shout Resurrection hope over the noise of devastation and death.
- We see him alive in churches willing to close their doors one Sunday morning to go out and serve our community.

We find him alive when we practice resurrection. Poet Wendell Berry used the term, practice resurrection, in the final line of one of his poems. As Christians, we, along with Mary, give witness to Christ’s one-time resurrection. But we practice resurrection when we demonstrate the power of God’s redemption for us and the world by how we live and love.

Brother Thomas of the Society of Saint Francis says, “Sometimes resurrection looks like having the courage to get out of bed. Sometimes it is answering the phone and talking to the person you’d rather not talk to. Perhaps it is going for a walk or picking up that paintbrush waiting for you to return to it. Maybe resurrection is letting go and accepting that we can’t control or fix things. Maybe resurrection is a nap, a smile, or a dozen cookies left on the doorstep for a neighbor’s house.

In a world smothered by death and hopelessness, this kind of reaching toward life is revolutionary.”<sup>v</sup>

Easter morning may begin with Jesus calling Mary’s name, but it ends with a command to proclaim and practice resurrection. The resurrection of Christ redeems the whole world one person at a time when Love meets us in the darkness, whispers our name, and everything changes.

Jesus invites us, invites you to graduate from a life ruled by the darkness of sin, guilt, shame, and death. Hand him your life and hear Jesus call your name as you cross the stage from death to life abundant in the here and now. This is possible because of what the Risen Christ has done, absorbing the worst of humanity upon the ugliness of the cross and transforming it into a beautiful display of God’s love and forgiveness for all.

*Mary wept.  
Shoulders shaking,  
tears running down her face.  
She said, They have taken my Lord away,  
and I don’t know where they put him.  
But here’s what Easter taught me:  
if you think you’ve lost God,  
if it feels like heaven has slipped through the cracks,  
if you feel like the night will never end,  
then know, there is no hide-and-seek with the divine  
that doesn’t end in you being found.  
Stay still.  
Keep breathing.  
God is closer than you think.*

—excerpt from “Lost and Found” by Rev. Sarah Speed | @sanctifiedart

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.hustlefromtheheart.com/blog/names>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2019-04-15/john-201-18-2/>

<sup>iii</sup> Kate Bowler quote

<sup>iv</sup> <https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2020-04-06/john-201-18-3/>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.ssfamericas.org/post/practice-resurrection>