

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Easter Sunday- April 8, 2007

Scripture lessons: Acts 10:34-43 & John 20:1-18

HOW IT ALL BEGINS

Jesus says, “Mary,” and it just doesn’t sound right. It’s not the way we’d expect someone who’s been mercilessly killed, but who’s alive again to go around spreading the news. It’s not the way we’d expect God, who’d been hung so pitilessly on a cross, to come back and start taking charge.

Wouldn’t we expect first something like a cracking earthquake and some roaring thunder that would be felt and heard *everywhere*? Wouldn’t we expect something big, booming, and unmistakable to follow- a sky-full of the heavenly host, let’s say, declaring with full and otherworldly authority that from now on You-Know-Who really will be running the show? In the foreground, wouldn’t we expect the Risen Christ to appear larger than life, straight ahead, and right in our faces so that *everyone* would see him, no doubt about it?

Just two days before he had said, “It is finished.” He’d said that it was over and done with, *finito*, and he’d given up his spirit. He’d been taken from the cross, wrapped in grave clothes, sealed in a tomb and left for dead- really and truly dead, a whole weekend’s worth of dead.

But now he’s back. He’s taken the best shot his enemies could ever give and it wasn’t enough. Sunday morning has come- the stone’s rolled away, the tomb’s open, and his body’s gone. We’re so accustomed to hearing the story of this amazing, stunning, and world-changing event that we often forget what it says about how it actually happened. Jesus’ resurrection comes *quietly*.

He doesn’t burst the grave with lightning bolts. Jesus’ victory over death is *not* accompanied by trumpet blasts and ear-splitting shouts. The risen Christ comes back *quietly*, slipping in on an old friend who can’t even make him out because of her tears.

Jesus says, “Mary,” and it doesn’t sound right because if he’s going to do it this way, if he’s going to show himself to the world one person at a time, don’t you think he’d start with one of the other disciples? *Leading* disciples are there, too, right in the opening scene as John tells it. Peter and John, the disciple Jesus especially loved, were among those who’d been with him from the start. He had *handpicked* them to follow him. They’re at the tomb, too, and Jesus could have appeared first to one of them. Why doesn’t he?

Mary is there off to the side. She’s crying her eyes out, wondering what on earth she’ll do next. Her whole world has been ripped apart at Jesus’ cross on Friday and the remaining shreds of it have been stolen from her now at his tomb on Sunday. But Peter and John are there, too, and in a much different mode.

They’ve run up to the entrance of the tomb. They see the clothes of a corpse, but no corpse. Peter runs in and sees the head wrap rolled up like somebody put it away, like someone knew he wouldn’t need it anymore. John, for his part, has started putting things together. He’s started to understand what he’s looking at and he *believes*. He’s the first one to believe that Jesus is risen.

But if Jesus is alive and ready to start making his presence known why doesn’t he do it first with Peter or John? Their relationship with him is certainly of longer standing. They appear much better prepared to recognize, welcome, and believe in him again. So why does he wait for them to leave, and then go to Mary? It just doesn’t sound right.

Jesus chooses Mary in spite of the fact that she’s a woman, in spite of the fact that in their culture she’s a decidedly second-class person, someone who’s considered utterly unreliable in any matter of real importance. She’s someone whose gender alone is felt to make her unworthy of any serious attention. Jesus goes to her in spite of the life she’s lived before and in spite of the rumors that continue to dog her. The word about Mary Magdalene in the church for most of our history has been that she was a prostitute. It’s far past time to get rid of that idea because of the

huge mistake and ugly rumor it's always been. The Bible *never* says anything about Mary being a prostitute.

It does say that before she met Jesus she had been possessed. She'd been driven by Satan, or at least by some of Satan's flunkies- seven of them, according to Luke's gospel (8:2). Yet from the day that Jesus had delivered her from those demons, she had been one of his most faithful followers. She had remained at his cross when almost everyone else had fled. But that didn't mean that in the eyes of most she was any less of a woman "with a past", any less someone who was of highly questionable reputation, any less of a person who always would be unworthy of any special distinction.

But she *is* the one to whom the risen Jesus first appears and she doesn't pretend to be anyone other than who she is. She's a woman lost in grief, so much so that she doesn't even seem to wonder about the two angels she sees sitting in the tomb. She's so caught up in sorrow that her only thought seems to be that somebody has added insult to injury by taking Jesus' body away. Her only thought seems to be that her deliverer, her teacher, her friend, and her Lord who yesterday was dead, is now dead and gone, and she has to get his body back. She at least has to do that. It seems she never even considers that something else might have happened here, that maybe the miracle of all miracles has taken place, and that Jesus is alive again. That never seems to cross her mind, for she clearly doesn't have the faith that John does.

John had looked into the same tomb and immediately understood that good news was on the way because Jesus didn't need a tomb anymore. But Mary is *not* like that. She has no faith "at the ready" that could qualify her as *the* one to whom Jesus should first appear. But "Mary" *is* the first name Jesus speaks. That *is* how it all begins.

Up until that moment, Jesus is only the gardener to her. He's just some faceless nobody who happens to be there, someone who might help her to find Jesus' body. Her tears are still flowing and her heart is still breaking, but Jesus, risen from the dead, is about to change all that. He says to her, "Mary," and suddenly her world is new.

From now on, Mary knows. She knows that her life and its meaning have started over. Her Savior is alive and has called her by name. With that one word, "Mary", he has announced himself risen from dead, and though it may not sound right, that *is* how it all begins.

Mary says to Jesus, "Rabbouni". She says it just like she had before, just like in their old times together. She says it because she knows that she has a new lease on life and she's absolutely determined to hold onto it. She's ready to hold onto Jesus as if he's about to leave again, as if she's afraid she might lose him yet another time.

She doesn't understand that this *will* happen, but only later. It will happen, but *not* like before. In any case, she doesn't understand that now is not the time for any of that. Now is the time for the good news that Jesus is risen.

But there is more to it than that. Jesus says, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." He says, "Yes, I've died on a cross, was sealed in a tomb, but am alive again. Spread that word and celebrate it to the hilt, but know this even more. Know that I'm not just alive again, but that I'm ascending to my Abba. Know this, because it means that because of my life, death, and resurrection you can know that my God is your God, too. My Abba is your Abba, too. Tell *that* to everyone and celebrate it to the heavens. Rejoice in the *whole* good news."

Jesus says all of this first to Mary. He comes first to her, I think, exactly because everyone else would see her as so unworthy of it. "Mary" is the first word the risen Christ speaks because all those considered unworthy are exactly the ones God wants to hear the good news first- the good news that the Abba to whom Jesus returns is their Abba, that the God who is Jesus' God is their God, too, and that this God knows each of them by name. Jesus first says, "Mary". That's how the *good news* begins.

Which opens up the big question for all of us this morning: what are the demons rattling around in each of our pasts? What makes each of us seem unworthy to have our name spoken by Jesus,

the risen Lord? What might count each of us out just as Mary might have been counted out by her gender or personal history or some deficiency in her faith? Whatever those things might be for each of us, there's good news today. No one who ever comes to Jesus' tomb is left there alone.

Alive again, he comes to each of us and calls us by name. In his call, our whole world begins again, too. Life comes to us fresh again today because the One who's calling us is more than a teacher. He's more than a Rabbouni or a friend. This One is God, God in our flesh, God come to live with us to show us the way, God crucified, dead, and buried by us, but God alive again, God calling us again, God demonstrating again that nothing can ever make this God give up on us.

Jesus sheds his grave clothes, leaves his tomb, and comes to Mary Magdalene. She's crying and crying. He calls her by name to let her know that he lives again for *her*. He calls her by name to let her know that he wants *her* to come to life.

Short on faith, troubled by demons, the wrong kind of person; afraid that our world's been torn apart, afraid that its remaining shreds have been stolen away- that's Mary Magdalene, that's you, and that's me. Mary at the tomb is all of us.

But Jesus comes and calls us by name. He wants us simply to see *who he is*. He's not just some faceless nobody who might help us just to get by for a little bit. Instead, he's the One who was dead, but is alive again. He's the One who has ascended to his Abba and to our Abba, to his God and to our God. He's the One who is God, the Lord of all, the One who wants and is able to bring us to life.

He knows us by name and from the inside out. He knows that none of us have pasts that sparkle, that all of us have been and have done things, that we all are and still do things that make us unworthy. But none of that matters to him. It doesn't matter because the kingdom of our God and of this Christ does not begin with us getting our act together. It doesn't begin with Jesus coming first to the worthy ones.

It begins instead when Jesus says "Mary". It continues as he comes to each of us and calls us by name. It continues as we turn to him and come back to life.

Jesus says, "Mary." That's how it all begins and it may not sound right, but what do you think? On this Easter morning, what do you think? "Mary"- it may not sound right, but it couldn't sound any better. Amen.