

## Easter Day sermon: “Calling Us By Name”

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb.

At that moment, half-way through this Gospel story we read today, as we gather to celebrate the Feast of the Resurrection—at that moment there wasn’t anything else that Mary could do. Everything had been taken away from her, everything she thought she had found was lost, everything that Jesus had helped her life become now lay in ruins all around her. There was nothing else she could do but weep.

When the Roman soldiers had taken Jesus outside the city and crucified him on Friday, it had seemed to Mary that her own life had come to an end, too. Her life was all bound up with Jesus. Jesus had saved her life. Jesus had pulled her back from a life of chaos and waste and meaninglessness, and Jesus had given her a real reason to live. We are told in Luke’s Gospel that Mary had been possessed by seven demons—and although Luke never specifies what those demons were, and although we today might be more comfortable talking about mental illness or emotional disorder than demonic possession, it is clear that Mary’s life was pretty messed up before Jesus found her. Ancient church tradition says that Mary was a prostitute—that’s why, in our stained glass window of the empty tomb, Mary is depicted with red hair, and with her hair down, not covered by a veil, not like a “respectable” woman of the time would have worn it. Now, none of the four Gospels actually *says* that Mary was a prostitute; that’s one of those traditions that isn’t really grounded in the Word—but it is the traditional understanding that Mary’s life was pretty empty, Mary’s life was pretty meaningless, Mary’s life was pretty much unloved, before Jesus found her.

But Jesus changed all that. Jesus cast out the seven demons. Jesus brought mental healing and helped her find emotional balance. Jesus showed her a quality of love that didn’t demand anything from her, didn’t *take* anything from her, but *gave* her acceptance and *gave* her compassion and *gave* her a vision of herself that was higher and deeper and truer than any way she’d ever seen herself before. Jesus showed her a quality of love that opened her heart, and filled her with life; Jesus showed her a quality of love that opened up all the dead ends she’d run into, that took away all the bondages and barriers that held her down, that released possibilities and potentials for her that she’d never even known before. And Jesus helped her show that same quality of love in her actions, too; Luke records that Mary was generous with her personal wealth, and helped support Jesus and the disciples back in Galilee, when they were preaching and teaching and healing and spreading the news of the kingdom of God. Jesus showed Mary that her life was caught up in a life that was larger than her own, her life was caught up in the life and the love and the reign of God that was coming into the world in Jesus himself, and in those whom Jesus called. That was the life that Jesus had given to Mary.

And then Jesus was crucified. Then Jesus died—and Mary felt something inside herself die with him. Everything that Jesus had done for her, everything that Jesus had empowered her to do for herself—all of it seemed taken away, broken, destroyed, dead. So, early in the morning on the first day of the week, as soon as the Sabbath day restriction on travel was over, Mary went to the tomb, Mary went to the grave of her friend, to mourn there, and to remember there the life that, for a little while, she had had. And when she got there she found the tomb empty, she found the

body gone, she found her last link to Jesus severed, she found her last way to feel even a little connection with Jesus taken away. It was more than she could bear. There was nothing she could do but weep.

And turning around, she saw someone she thought was the gardener; and he at least had a kind word for her—“Woman, why are you weeping?” And she poured out her whole helpless sense of grief to this stranger, “Sir, if you have taken the body, tell me where it is, and I will bury it properly.” And then he says one word, then he calls her by name, “Mary”—and when she hears her name being called by that beloved voice, when she hears her name being called by that same voice that once called her back from chaos and waste and meaninglessness, *then* she knows him, then she knows that it is Jesus, then she knows that the tomb is empty, not because the body has been stolen, but the tomb is empty because Jesus has broken the power of death, because Jesus has overcome the terror of the grave, because Jesus has passed through pain and suffering and sorrow and loss and has taken them up into a life that is larger than they are, a life that is so full of the love of God that nothing, nothing, not even death, can hold it down.

And then Mary realizes that because Jesus lives again, then she can live again, too. The larger life that Jesus taught her about, the larger life that Jesus helped her experience in genuine and unconditional love—that larger life is *there*, right in front of her, smiling in the morning sun, calling her by name. All the new possibilities that Jesus had given her, all the opening up of dead-ends that Jesus had shown her, all the generosity of love that Jesus had empowered in her—all of that comes back to her now, all of it is raised up and made alive and caught up into the larger life of God in her communion with the Risen Christ. Mary is alive again, because *Jesus is risen*, and Jesus is calling her by name.

And that is the part of the story that calls out to us on this Easter morning. Because the Good News of Resurrection is more than just an abstract speculation about something that happened once upon a time to Jesus. The Good News of Resurrection is that our lives, too, are hidden with Christ in God—our lives, too, are caught up into a life that is larger than our own, so that, like Mary in the story, we can live again, we can be *fully alive*, we can have a sense of possibilities and potentials, we can have a sense of the dead-ends of our lives opening up into new promise, we can have a sense of inspiration and encouragement to share with one another a genuine and unconditional love that calls forth from us a quality of living greater than anything we had ever imagined. The Good News of Resurrection is that Jesus calls *us* by name, with all the gifts and talents and quirks and problems and glories that we have—Jesus calls us each by name and takes us up into a living love that is larger than our own.

That is the Good News that we celebrate this Easter morning. That is the Good News we lift up in song and prayer and praise. And that is the Good News that we can take home with us today, and discover again and again and again in the new possibilities and new potentials and new promises of grace that are poured into our lives through the blessing and the love and the larger life of Christ. And that is why we shout with joy today, “Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!”