

“Who Are You Looking For?”

1 Corinthians 15: 19; John 20:1-18

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The last time we were in this room together it was dark. The banners, the paraments, the stoles, the shining communion ware were taken away before our eyes as the lights went down. Someone took my stole out of my hands, took it from me and carried it away. The candle above the cross of thorns was blown out. Did you see how it took more than one try to get the flame to die? But it was still startling to see the upward curl of smoke. We sat in barren semi-darkness. We sang. Some cried. We left.

Now it is morning on the third day. The light is back. The cross that was draped in sorrow is covered in living blooms; the color and the banners and “Alleluias!” have returned. In places across the globe last night, people kept Easter vigil. Some of them lit bonfires in the early hours of the morn and used those fires, banked in darkness, to light Christ candles in their sanctuaries, parading the light back in with song. This is the day of Life and Light, of newness, the Day of Days, and we are here to sing and pray and shout, believing what we cannot see, or do our best to act the part against all the times and places where it is still dark.

It is still dark, says John, when Mary comes to the tomb. It is still dark and she is grieving. When she arrives, of all the despicable things!, the tomb has been tampered with somehow, the stone removed from the entrance. Mary goes running back to tell someone that something must be done. Nothing could be done before, but this at least, this theft, this vandalism must be dealt with. Jesus’ body has gone missing. What other explanation can there be? “In a world of cause and effect, of established rules as to what can happen and how, in a closed structure that allows only for the old and familiar to occur, Mary’s logic is right on target.”¹

What other explanation can there be for the darkneses that tinge our mornings and our nights, for the ways our hopes have been tampered with? What other explanation can there be for the fears we feel about our lives not be going as we planned, about being a nation under some kind of siege, about being a nation at war, about the jobs we’ve lost, that our friends have lost, our kids have never found? What other explanation can there be for the darkneses that seems to lie in wait for the health we are trying to hold onto or have already begun to lose, the illnesses that have struck people we love who are too young, too old, too fit, too good, too dear to us to be parked outside some emergency room, radiation room, some chemo closet, operating theater or X ray-MRI-ultrasound-cat scan-cubicle of fear? What other explanation can there be for the darkness of divorce papers, no matter the necessary; of bankruptcy papers, no matter how hard we tried; for eviction notices; for life-was-not-supposed-to be like this documents? What other explanation can there be than the usual ones: bad luck, bad genes, bad planning, bad politics, bad timing, bad people? It’s enough to make you want to run.

Mary runs. Peter runs. The other disciple runs. The other disciple *outruns!* The men look into the tomb in a sequence that seems designed to make absolutely sure that no one gets more stature in the story than the other. They look in stages, and see in

stages, and discover in stages, that, yes, Mary has it right, the tomb is empty.

The other disciple, says John, “saw and believed.”² What does he believe? Is it what men usually believe that makes them check out for themselves unlikely things said by women? He checks it out and believes that she got it right, is that it? Or does he believe that this emptiness is not a taking away but a taking-leave from other explanations that make sense. It isn’t clear. Thanks be to God for all the places in scripture where it isn’t clear—It isn’t clear! And it just might be the other disciple did know that Jesus’ body was not taken away. That Jesus had left death behind.³ The words are cryptic, “He saw and believed,” but there they are.

Either way, the men see things and see each other seeing, but they say nothing. The men go home together. But Mary, “do something” Mary, “I’ll do it” Mary stays—miserable, determined, and crying.

Now for the first time she looks into the tomb and sees two “angels in white” sitting there. Their miraculous presence doesn’t even register, and for the first time we who read the story know that something other than the usual really is taking place.

The angels don’t make a proclamation. They don’t say, “He is risen! They don’t say, “It’s time to give your mental assent to a set of principles about life after death.” They ask Mary why she is weeping. It’s one of John’s wonderful ironies, but it’s so wondrously open that it can also be more. It’s an act of *seeing*, truly seeing and caring for someone in distress.

Instead of being speechless or startled or in any way shaken from her own point of view, Mary tells them what the matter is. “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” Whether or not she would have had a chance to register the presence of angels, we never get to know. Because right then Mary turns and sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn’t recognize him.

There are so many high falootin’ explanations for what this lack of recognition means. But C.S. Lewis might be most on target. In the book he wrote just after his wife’s early death from cancer, he said, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid...At other times it feels like being mildly drunk, or concussed. There is a sort of invisible blanket between the world and me. I find it hard to take in what anyone says.”⁴

Mary cannot take in what anyone says. When Mary sees Jesus standing there, she doesn’t recognize him through her blanket of grief. Or perhaps she is intent on her understanding of events, and corpses do not stand outside their tombs. For the second time she hears the question, “Woman why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” The second statement is less a question than an invitation, like the one Jesus offered the very first time he speaks in the Gospel of John.⁵ “What are you looking for?” he says to Andrew and another man who call him “Rabbi” and ask where he is staying (John 1:38). His only answer then was “Come and see.”

Mary is still intent on finding a dead man’s body. It takes her name to shake her free. For some of us an empty tomb is enough. Some of us this morning are other disciples who need no more than folded graveclothes to see and believe. But others need more to clear the darkness. We need to hear our names.

Theologian and poet Howard Thurman tells of the day when he was boy that a man in the neighborhood, Kenchion Butler, lost his mind. Kenchion ran the barbershop. He went outside the barbershop and stood under a tree, walking in a circle and swinging an ax, babbling and crying, striking the tree with the ax each time he circled round.

People on the block gathered, but not too close. A sheriff came but stayed in the surrounding crowd, waiting for a chance. Then someone thought of Ma Walker, and young Howard was sent to get her. "She was a most unusual woman in our community," he writes, "distinguished for two things: Her personal care for all kinds of people, and her beautiful rose garden, dedicated to God."

Thurman went to Ma Walker's house, told her the story, and she came back with him. When she was within earshot of the group around the tree, "she called the name of the man with the tortured mind. There was just a slight hesitation in his step as he located her and the sound of the voice." As she approached, "the sheriff took his pistol out of the holster and the crowd moved completely to one side, making way....Ma Walker kept on repeating his name as she stood in his circular path. Then they met, their eyes held, she said simply, 'Come, Kenchion, you must go home with me.' And he did." Thurman says Ma Walker had a gift for honoring people, for honoring the life within another, making them feel known and understood.⁶

It may not be that Mary knows who Jesus is. It may be Jesus' knowing Mary that sets all other explanations for this day aside. If that is so, then on this day you have so many other choices than subscribing to ideas about the empty tomb or the resurrection of the dead.

You can listen for your name spoken in a place where old explanations no longer hold. Your name. You can listen for your name spoken with tenderness by someone who sees all your distress, knows your certitudes and how they fail.

Last week my husband and I went to Montreat for a few days. We were leaving a restaurant in a nearby mountain town when I saw in the glass case under the cash register two small photographs of young men in uniform, one in the navy the other in the army.

"Where are they?" I asked, afraid of the answer.

"Iraq," the old woman behind the counter said.

Assuming they were grandsons, I asked, "What are their names?" But they were boys from the local community.

"I don't remember their names," she said, then added, "But pray for them anyway. God knows their names."

Listen for your name this day. Listen in the gladness. Listen in the music, in the sound of water, torn bread, poured wine. Listen in the scent of flowers. Listen in the "Alleluias!" Alleluia is just enough of a murmur to hold every name in its sound.⁷

Christ is risen. Alleluia!

Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann et al., *Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 262.

2. NRSV.

3. My thanks to Gail R. O'Day for this powerful statement, *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 841.

4. C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Seabury Press, 1961), 7.

5. *The New Interpreters Bible*, vol. IX (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 842.

6. Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963; reprint, Richmond, Ind.: Friends United Press, 1995), 107-8 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

7. My thanks to Kim Long for "Stammering Mystery, Dancing Joy: The Many Languages of Easter Worship," *Journal For Preachers* 27, no. 3 (Easter 2004): 10-17, in which she quotes Balthasar Fischer on the possibilities contained in "Alleluia."