

Sermon + Easter Vigil, John 20:1-18
April 11, 2020
For Resurrection Evangelical Lutheran Church
The Rev. Jonathan Linman, Ph.D.

“Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” This simple phrase conveys a defining moment of the account of the resurrection in John’s Gospel. “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’” (cf. John 20:1 ff.)

There’s something profound about hearing your name, especially from the lips of someone near and dear to you.

I very much look forward to learning your names, especially when I can be in ministry with you in person. Learning your names is one of my top priorities as I begin my pastorate at Resurrection Church, because there is something powerful about knowing and being known by name, especially by people who care.

It’s very different from the many occasions when computers can mine data to figure out our names, allowing people anonymous to us to be on a first-name basis with us on junk mail and during sales calls, all the while trying to convey a sense of familiarity when there is none. Using our names in such ways is offensive as ever larger, anonymous, impervious organizations intrude on our lives.

All of this in our tech-based experience is very much in contrast with those precious times when the beloved other names us by name. That’s sweet. Hearing our names from family members and friends, people with whom we are close, can make all the difference.

It certainly did for Mary in the context of this gospel passage from John which recounts the first experiences of the empty tomb.

Mary was weeping outside the tomb when it was discovered that Jesus’ body was gone. She assumed it had been misplaced or perhaps stolen. The missing body only compounded her sense of grief at the loss of her beloved teacher, Jesus. It was a scene of confusion and dismay.

Then Jesus himself appears to Mary. She thinks he’s the gardener and says, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

That’s when Jesus named her name, “Mary.”

It's the most ordinary of exchanges, when people routinely encounter each other. Mary responds by calling Jesus, "Rabbi," what she no doubt always called him in the years that she had known him. "Rabbi." Teacher.

But this was no ordinary set of circumstances. Jesus had been raised from the dead, a new reality that overturns all the assumptions of the world and upends our usual experience of life and death. The one dead is now alive again. That just doesn't happen.

The only thing that could break through this cognitive dissonance, the unreality of this new reality, was Mary recognizing her own name on the living, breathing lips of her beloved teacher who had been crucified and who was presumed dead.

Recognizing her own name, she recognized Jesus as the living one. Mary then ran off in haste to tell the others, "I have seen the Lord."

In short, hearing her own name, "Mary," from the mouth of Jesus made the difference for her between unbelief and belief, misunderstanding and understanding. Hearing her name bridged the chasm between death and life. Thus, for Mary, this simple, but earth-shatteringly profound encounter with Jesus over a name became a matter of life and death.

Which brings us to our own lives and circumstances. We, too, are known by name by our God in Christ. This name recognition is made explicit at baptism. In the case of my life, on the lips of Pastor Raymond Swanson at First Lutheran Church in Monmouth, Illinois on Sunday, December 31, 1961 was my name: "Jonathan, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

In the power of the trinitarian word with the Holy Spirit, it was revealed that I was known to God by name, Christ himself naming and claiming me through the priestly ministry of Pastor Swanson.

My ears heard it, though I have no conscious recollection of it. But maybe buried deep in my subconscious is the memory of this experience, though now inaccessible. Deep inside of me is that moment of recognition, God in Christ speaking, "Jonathan, by grace, I claim you as my own and will love you and be with you forever. Nothing in life or death can change that, nothing can stop my abiding love for you." In essence, that's what is communicated in baptism.

If you've been baptized, you have had the same experience. Christ himself has named you. Christ himself has claimed you.

Just as hearing her name made all the difference for Mary in coming around to being embraced by the reality of Jesus' resurrection, so too our being named at baptism throws wide open the door to our participating in and sharing in that new life in Christ.

It's as simple as can be: word, water, your name, in the power of the Spirit. And it's that profound. It makes all the difference between life and death for us and for the world.

So, as I begin to conclude this sermon, I want to encourage you to follow along in the worship materials available to you. Recite the Apostles' Creed, the creed used at baptism, and then engage in an act of devotion to remember and give thanks for your own baptism.

As the home worship resource suggests, dip your finger in a bowl of water, making the sign of the cross on your forehead. I encourage you to name your own name and say, "You are baptized. I am baptized." With your ears of faith, listen also for divine words of loving regard that convey the extent of the radical grace of God in Christ as you are known by God on a first-name basis.

May this experience of first-name-basis thankful remembrance make all the difference for you today, especially as the global pandemic profoundly affects you and your loved ones and may cause you to doubt your future and the future of the world. But you are named by God and are in God's hands no matter what befalls you and befalls the world.

Dwell with the experience of this loving, living reality to the extent that you may feel compelled to tell those around you, or to pick up the phone and call someone, or text them, saying: "I have seen the Lord!"

For Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia.