

Jim Vitale
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God Speaks Your Name
John 20:1-18

Pr Jim's Sermon
Easter Sunday—April 12, 2020

“God Speaks Your Name”
John 20:1-18

I was playing out in the side-yard one day many years ago when they showed up—a man and a boy. As I came around to the front of the house I saw my father absorbed in conversation with them. “Look who it is!” he said, gesturing to the pair. The way he said it made me feel like I should've definitely known who these people were and been excited about their sudden appearance. I stared into the faces of the two, with not an inkling of recognition. They seemed rank strangers to me.

I looked up at my dad and, being significantly less subtle than I thought I was being, mouthed “who are they?”

“It's Zack!” he laughed.

Zack! I thought, recognition flooding my brain. *Of course! My best friend from Massachusetts!* We were inseparable until I moved to New York. I hadn't seen him in years but still I was astounded that I had forgotten his face.

We've all had moments like this, and I think they give us the smallest glimpse into what Mary Magdalene experienced on the day of the resurrection.

Mary comes to the tomb in the morning darkness. Darkness, as we have learned over the past few weeks, signifies that Mary has yet to fully understand what Jesus is doing. She arrives to find the stone rolled away from the tomb and rushes off to tell the other disciples that Jesus' body has been stolen. Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved sprint off to the tomb to see for themselves, with Mary close behind.

Peter and the beloved disciple skid to a halt at the tomb, bent and out of breath. They stoop to look inside and find the linens balled up in the corner—Jesus is gone. Peter and the beloved disciple appear to realize that something miraculous has happened, but they say nothing and return to their homes, leaving Mary to weep outside the tomb. She just started mourning Jesus's death and now she has lost him again.

Suddenly, she hears a voice behind her. “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” The voice asks. Mary turns to see Jesus standing there before her. But she doesn't recognize him. Instead she pleads with him, mistaking him for the gardener. “If you stole the body, please return it to me,” she begs.

And then Jesus speaks her name, “Mary,” and suddenly she is flooded with realization—“Teacher!” she cries in return.

It's an odd moment isn't it? Why doesn't Mary recognize Jesus? This is the leader she loved so dearly, the one she now grieves, and yet she doesn't recognize him? Some have explained the moment away by saying that Jesus' resurrected body just looks differently than his old body, but that misses the point.

To better understand what is happening here we have to jump back ten chapters and a few weeks, back to a short message Jesus delivers after he opens the eyes of the man born blind. Jesus compares himself to a shepherd. He says, "The sheep hear [the shepherd's] voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice."

The shepherd calls the sheep by name, and the sheep know the shepherd's voice. Mary's encounter with the resurrected Jesus outside the tomb is an illustration of this very point. Mary doesn't recognize Jesus, her shepherd, until he calls her by her name and in that moment, she knows his voice.

The good news is that Jesus the Shepherd knows your name. This may seem like an obvious point, but it's profound to say that God knows our names. It reminds us that God is always near to us. Our God is not some divine watch-maker who wound up the universe, set it in motion, and then walked away. Our God is near, close, and intimate. Our God knows you and calls you by name. Jesus says, "I am the *good* shepherd. And the *good* shepherd lays down his life for his sheep." God in God's goodness has come close to us. The good shepherd has only our best interests at heart and invites us into a relationship of love.

In hearing her own name, Mary recognizes her good shepherd and responds by calling him a name of her own, "Rabbouni" which means "Teacher." There are several ways you can read this response. Maybe Mary is just using the name she's always called him, the way students call their teacher "professor." Maybe she uses it as a term of endearment, the way men in their forties still refer to their high school football coach as "coach." Or, maybe Mary is making a profound statement of faith.

Throughout John's gospel "teacher" is the name disciples use to refer to Jesus. Mary's response claims Jesus has her teacher and renews her own identity as student. It is as if Jesus says to her "you are my beloved sheep," and she replies, "yes, and you are the good shepherd." Jesus calls Mary by her name and Mary replies by reaffirming her position as a disciple, as a follower of Jesus. She starts living into her discipleship only two verses later when she testifies to others about her encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

As I prepared this sermon I wondered, when have I ever heard Jesus call my name? And how did I respond? Some people claim that they've heard the disembodied voice of God calling their name. I'm glad for them, but I think I'm in good company when I say that has *never* been my situation. I've longed to hear the comforting voice of God speak my name, and I'm still waiting.

Jesus' incarnation was a limited event. Jesus came to earth as a human for a time and then he left. He doesn't speak to us the same way he did to Simon Peter, Mary Magdalene, or the beloved disciple. You probably won't hear your name whispered from the heavens. But I do believe that God still speaks our names in other ways.

I think I heard God speak my name when I took a class in Seminary on preaching the Old Testament. As we studied those stories, stretched them open, walked around in them, the Bible bloomed like a garden. It was no longer a set of static, boring, outdated accounts of old, irrelevant things. It blossomed into a profoundly exciting, living story of God's goodness for the world. Something resonated deep in my heart, and I ached for more. In that moment I encountered God's grace. God called my name, and, like Mary, my heart cried "Rabbouni!" I undertook to follow Jesus by dwelling deeply in and sharing the amazing stories of scripture with the world.

I don't know how you've heard God speak your name, and I don't know how you've responded to that call, but I'd love to hear about it sometime. Jesus spoke Mary's name and she responded by reaffirming her call to discipleship. Maybe God spoke your name in a beautiful piece of music and you responded by spreading the gospel through music. Maybe God spoke your name when you became a parent, and you responded by imitating God's love through empathetic, compassionate, and virtuous parenting. Maybe God spoke your name in athletics and you responded by sharing your faith through coaching young athletes. The ways we can hear God speak our names are as various and unique as our names themselves.

The good news for you this Easter morning is that the good shepherd knows your name. Listen deeply, and when you hear it, go and tell the world about this God who calls your name.

Amen.