

“Encountering Jesus”
Acts 10:34-43
John 20:1-18

Easter, April 21, 2019
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We come on Easter Sunday for a celebration. The flowering of the cross is always one of my favorite parts of this service, where we get to see the transformation from the rough, bare wood to a thing of beauty.

We have indeed come a long way from that morning when Mary was walking to the tomb. We've come up with all kinds of ways to celebrate. I'm not sure of the origin of Easter eggs, but we use them to help celebrate this particular season—coloring them, putting messages on them. We've created traditions around celebrating this particular day.

And yet, that first morning was not one of celebration. As Mary came to the tomb, she was not celebrating. She was struggling, wondering how the one who had healed her could now be gone. Wondering how all their hopes for what Jesus would do and be could be gone. Wondering how the one they thought was the Messiah of Israel could be gone.

We have this wonderful story of her looking at the empty tomb, then going back and telling the disciples. The two disciples have a foot race to the tomb to find out who could be there first and see what was going on. Maybe there's something in there about being anxious to know what's going on with Jesus.

Mary follows them back. They seem to just drift away. We don't hear what happens with them after they've seen all that's gone on inside the tomb and found all those grave cloths still remaining. Unlike Lazarus when he came out of the grave, Jesus was not contained by those linens.

Mary looks in and sees two angels. Now, I think if I saw two angels, I would be shocked and amazed, but Mary simply asks them where they have taken the body. She is so focused, so distraught, that her first concern is what she brings. It does make me wonder how many times in life I bring my first concern forward so much that it blinds me to the very things that are going on around me, maybe even angels appearing or God coming.

Mary turns and goes out of the tomb, still weeping, and encounters another. We know it is Jesus, but Mary doesn't recognize him at first. She's weeping and it's not until she hears her name that she's able to move past all the things she's been thinking, all the stress and grief that she's been feeling, and recognize that something different than she expected is happening.

How many times in our lives do we have that moment where we suddenly recognize something different is happening than we thought it was? How many times do we let

God's grace reshape the way we see things so that suddenly we see it in a different light, in a new way? I wonder if it's not true for us, the same as for Mary, that oftentimes it takes that other voice, that voice of Jesus speaking our names, somehow getting our attention, helping us recognize that he is with us, that God's grace is among us. What happens when we hear our name? It feels to me like we struggle, not only hearing our name, but hearing the very grace that God would give.

I think humankind has a problem with sin. We don't necessarily use that word a lot, but basically we have a problem with the way our relationships get broken, the places we look to define our lives, or the things that we feel are defining our lives. So much of human life is shaped and contoured by the world around us. There's always going to be some of that. The problem comes as I move off-center and allow the values of the world to be what is most important to me.

If I had let a few of my friends dictate where my life should have gone, I should have perhaps stayed a basketball player, or I should have been an engineer, or I should have been a half a dozen other things. Or, I should define myself by how much money I have, how successful I am, or how famous I am. If I were to define myself by all the different things I am told to define myself by, first of all, I think I would have multiple personalities, but I would also feel like I was a failure. I don't think God put us here either to feel a failure or a success. When Jesus calls Mary's name, he's not asking her to show her successes or her failures. He simply calls her to recognize he's alive and that she can be a child of God.

It's really, really good news! The world doesn't define us. It shapes us, but central to who we are is the love of God. The problem I've always had in trying to accept that love is to know my own failures, my own sin, my own uncertainties, my own inabilities, my own anxieties. There's always this feeling that I can't be a child of God—I'm not good enough. There might have been a few times in my life when I've said, "Hey, life is going really good. I really don't need God." Usually those times come to a crash at some point. But either way, when I try to define life on my own terms, it's *not* really, really good news.

In Romans 6, we hear that he took sin with him to the cross, allowed it to be crucified. He's taking that which was in the way of our relationship with God, and taking it away. He's releasing us. I get caught in all those circles of activity, all those voices that tell me what to do, all those feelings of success or failure, of shame and uncertainty, and he says, "Let go. Let me have all of that. Let me take your anxiety. Let me take your sense of failure. Let me even take your sense of success, because it won't serve you in the long run. Let me take you and deliver you into the kingdom of God so that whoever trusts in him will know the forgiveness."

I think Mary, on that day, realized that something much bigger was happening than Jesus just having died. Now that he had risen, she began to recognize that something incredible was happening—something that reached beyond her and would reach throughout the world. It's an offering of God's grace to everyone. Perhaps she had that

sense that just as he had healed her of all the voices that were in her head, he would offer that healing to everyone.

We are called to know the fullness of grace, the very love of God in Jesus Christ, so that we might live. We are called, that we might follow him and not be defined by our worries, our successes, our uncertainties, but to be defined by the love of God, for we are children of God through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

He is risen! He is risen indeed. Amen.