

Taken from "Letting Go" John 20: 1-18 The Rev. Carol S. Wedell March 23, 2008

Can you imagine losing the only person who ever truly loved you? Can you imagine the devastation? The fear? The abject loneliness? Surely, as Mary approached the tomb sometime before dawn that morning, the weight on her chest must have been crushing. Three days before she had witnessed the crucifixion of the only person who had ever accepted her, the only one who had ever treated her with respect. I recently heard of a little boy who said that you could tell if someone loved you because your name was safe in their mouth. When Jesus said Mary's name, it was not only safe, it was filled with a love that healed the deepest wounds of her life.

Now, as she walked, the darkness enveloped her, as did her grief. Some of you here this morning have been in that situation, overcome with sorrow. It was hard to imagine how she would go on, or what would happen next. The one who had promised a whole new way of living was dead, and with him had died all of the hopes that she had held so dear. In a kind of numb fog, she must have made her way to the tomb, to do the only thing she knew to do - honor his life, by grieving. It's almost as if she was trying to keep the illusion that nothing had changed if she could simply be near his body.

Most of you know the story well. You know what happens next. Mary arrives at the tomb and finds that the stone has been rolled away. In a panic, she runs to get two of the disciples - "they've taken the Lord out of the tomb - we don't know where they've put him!" So the two disciples have a foot race back to the empty tomb. The first disciple to get there looked, but wouldn't go in. Then Peter arrives and as is his style, charges in and they both see the linen grave clothes, neatly folded, with the wrapping for Jesus' head carefully rolled up separately. We're told that the one disciple believed - although not what he believed and that the men then simply returned home. No searching for the body. No major discussion about what they should do or what this meant. They just quietly go back home.

But not Mary. Her grief has her held riveted to this spot. Why is Jesus' body missing? Why this final insult? Respectful care of the body is the only thing left for her to do. She enters the tomb and sees two angels. Now in almost any other place in the Bible when someone encounters an angel, their first reaction is fear. But the numbness that accompanies grief must have kept the fear at bay, for when they ask Mary why she is weeping, she doesn't panic or run away. No, she states her concern: "They have taken away my Lord and I don't know where they have laid him."

Then almost intuitively, it seems, Mary turns around, and sees someone else - someone she assumes to be the gardener, since she doesn't recognize him. He asks her the same question, "Woman, why are you weeping?"

"Whom are you looking for?" "Why are you weeping?" "Why?" How can she even begin to answer that question?

There is no small irony here - for Jesus is standing right in front of her, and she can't see him for who he is. She is looking for a dead body, and the risen Christ is right in front of her eyes. What's more, she thinks he may be the one who took the body! "Sir, if you took him away, please tell me - I'll put him back where he belongs, nice and safe in the tomb."

Now remember, the risen Christ has been right in front of her, speaking to her and she's been blind as a bat, she hasn't caught on. But then Jesus calls her name, "Mary." Mary. That one word assures her that she's not crazy. She is a person of value. She doesn't have to revert back to the kind of life she knew before she was transformed by Jesus. Her name - her life - is safe in his mouth.

Like us, Mary can't imagine that God can change this ending. When she discovers that Jesus' body has disappeared, she doesn't see God's hand at work. She thinks someone has stolen the body. Even when Jesus is standing right beside her speaking with her, she doesn't recognize him - until he calls her name.

Friends, that is at the heart of the Christian faith, at the heart of the affirmation of Easter morning. We may never understand, much less be able to explain the resurrection of Jesus. Truthfully, I've come to the point in my life where I'm not terribly concerned about being able to prove it. What matters is the encounter between ourselves and the Risen Lord - when we hear our name spoken - safe in Jesus' mouth. That's how we know that the resurrection is real. You can't explain the resurrection. It calls you out.

Most of us have, at one time or another, been where Mary is - lost, hurt, even in despair. And if we haven't been there yet, the reality of life is that at some point most of us will find ourselves there - disappointed and empty. When we hear our name spoken with the love of absolute acceptance - Joyce, Arlene, Alan, Earl, Debby, Jackie, Audrey, your name - then we will know that the resurrection is real, Real in its power to transform us, Real to take our pain, and transform it. Jesus Is Real and the one who calls our name.

Jesus speaks her name: "Mary." Can you imagine? The one who has meant everything to you, the one you saw dead and hanging on a cross, is here standing in front of you. I don't know about you, but the very first thing I would want to do would be to throw my arms around him and hang on for dear life. The light of recognition dawns in her eyes, "teacher!" Then Jesus says the strangest thing.

Truthfully, I don't like it. "Don't hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to my Father. Go and tell my brothers what I've said." Jesus shows up, calls her name, and yet won't even accept a hug! "Let go of me - and go."

A Presbyterian pastor, Susan Andrews has written, "Mary didn't recognize Jesus because she was looking for the old, not the new. Maybe, just maybe, she was looking for what she had lost, instead of what she was being given." Hanging on to the past keeps her from moving into the future where Jesus calls her to go. So she can't hold on to Jesus if she is to follow him.

We understand Mary all too well. For we all like to cling to the past. Remember the good ole days whenwhen the kids were little,... when money wasn't so tight,when relationships were easier, when soccer games weren't held on Sunday mornings, when...you name it. We're nostalgic for what we remember - and sometimes for what we simply wish had been

Here's the big problem with refusing to let go of the past. We miss the resurrection. The more we stay focused on what was or could have been, the less we are focused on where God is sending us now. The resurrection is not about what happens to you and I when we die - it's about what's happening in your life and in mine right now, in the church's life right now. Because friends - the resurrection is real, when you and I, with Mary, let go and go and tell others what we have seen and heard.

Easter always asks us what we're hanging on to, and what we need to let go of in order to go on the journey to which God calls us. Jesus tells her to let go! We don't get to cling on to Jesus and keep him for ourselves. "Let go of me! Don't keep hanging on. You have a job to do - go and tell." Jesus sends Mary out in ministry, into a world well beyond her grief and love for him. Jesus shows her how to transform her sorrow and loss into hope and life and love for others. To her surprise, to our surprise, to all those who only first hear, He Is...He Is Alive...He Is Alive and loves us and calls our name. Our name -- safe in His mouth.. And He is calling the name of the unchurched, of our neighbor. He is and He is calling,. Calling their name through our mouth. We also, must keep Jesus' name safe in our mouth as we sing his praises,. Jesus Is Alive. Hallelujah ...Happy Easter.

* * *