

Who Are You Looking For?

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on April 12, 2020, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.
Scripture: John 20:1-18
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As the state-ordered shutdown on gatherings progressed from mid to late March, and it became clear that we would be celebrating Holy Week and Easter while sheltering-in-place, I had to confront a whole host of emotions and questions. I was deeply disappointed. I was angry. I was grieving. How could we celebrate the most important communal holy days in the Christian calendar while staying isolated in our homes?

There is no question that this Easter will be different from any other Easter I've celebrated in my lifetime. It will differ from any that we've celebrated together since I've been your Associate Pastor. The sanctuary is empty, the organ is silent, and the Easter liturgical art remains stored away, waiting for another season. We remain cloistered in our homes, isolated and perhaps even fearful, worried about our safety and uncertain about what the near future will bring—uncertain even when we might be able to go out safely and freely again.

At the same time, though, I can't help but think that this Easter may actually be most like the very first Easter two millennia ago. As you read any of the gospel accounts of that first Easter, you see no crowds of faithful gathered to praise God and celebrate the resurrection. Instead, the followers of Jesus were in hiding, afraid for their lives. They were reeling from the trauma they had witnessed. They were grieving the unbearable loss they had suffered, and they were uncertain about what the near future might bring—uncertain when they might be able to go out safely and freely again.

Instead of great crowds shouting “Alleluia!”, the very first witnesses to the resurrection were small groups. In the three synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, it is said that the women came to anoint the body for proper burial—two women, or three, plus a few others. In John's version that Amalira just read, it's just one person—Mary Magdalene, who then goes to find Peter and the beloved disciple. Certainly this was a small enough group to maintain “social distance.”

Today, Pastor Jeff and I are beginning a new sermon series, called “The Seven Next Words of Christ.” You may be familiar with the seven last words of Christ—those are the seven words or phrases that Jesus says from the cross, as recorded across the four gospels. These seven words are often part of the liturgy of Good Friday observances, and one of the services we offered both last year and this past Good Friday as a series of short videos on our Facebook page.

The Seven Next Words of Christ are seven of the most important things that the risen Christ says to his disciples during the resurrection appearances across the four gospels and the Acts of the Apostles. Just as the seven last words capture important themes in Jesus' ministry, the seven next words urge the disciples to continue that ministry and offer a word of hope to them, and to us. Throughout the seven weeks of this Easter season, we'll be exploring these seven words from

Jesus and what they have to say to us in this time. And there is no better time to hear a word of hope from Jesus than now.

We don't know why exactly Mary Magdalene visited the tomb early on the third day. In the other versions of the gospel, we are told that the women—Mary Magdalene and others—have come to the tomb with spices to anoint the body, as was their cultural custom, and the role of women in their time. So perhaps Mary came to do this. But John's gospel makes no mention that this is why she is there. We are not told that she comes with any specific purpose. She comes alone, rather than with any of Jesus's family or the other women who followed him throughout his ministry. And I think that this is a deliberate plot point made by this gospel's writer. By bringing Mary Magdalene to the tomb alone, with nothing other than her empty hands and grieving heart, John's version of the resurrection becomes intensely personal, powerfully poignant, and achingly appropriate for the time in which we're living.

Like Mary, we are isolated, physically and socially, from those whom we love, and those who support and care for us. Like her, we are grieving the losses of our life. Like her, we are unable to participate in the rituals of our faith that usually bring us comfort. Like her, we have watched helplessly as our own lives and indeed, our whole world has spun out of control. Like her, we have watched in desperation as the things that once gave meaning to our lives have slowly seeped away, leaving us without direction or destination. Like her, we have had our lives upended in such a way that we have no idea what day it is or what the future might hold. Like her, we stand at the tomb with empty hands and grieving hearts, searching for our savior.

It could be that Mary came to anoint the body. But it also could be her grief that drove her to the tomb alone, her desire to see her beloved teacher one last time, to sit near him and whisper her tearful goodbyes, which she was not able to do at his violent death. Whether it is to anoint the body or just to be near it, I understand how distraught she must have been to see that he was gone, and I understand her frantic run to get the other disciples for help, and I understand her despair as she weeps at the empty tomb.

And then, just when her despair seems insurmountable, Mary turns to see a man standing there. Perhaps she thought he was slightly familiar. Perhaps her vision was obscured by her tears. Perhaps she wasn't really looking at him. Whatever it is, she doesn't realize that it's Jesus standing before her. Just as he always did throughout his ministry, the first thing Jesus does is ask Mary two questions. "Why are you weeping?" he asks, and "Whom are you looking for?" Still, she doesn't recognize him, and thinks that he's the gardener. It's only when he calls her by her name that she realizes who he is.

These questions speak to the heart of the grief and loss that Mary Magdalene must have been feeling. And for me this year, these questions speak to the heart of our grief and loss in this unprecedented time. These questions of Jesus call to us to confront our own feelings, to face our fears and uncertainties, to admit to the despair we are feeling. Why are we weeping? Who are we looking for? What sorrow do you carry right now?

Jesus asks these questions, encouraging us to encounter our own grief. Then, as he did with Mary, he pierces that grief and calls us by name. This is the heart of the Easter message, friends:

that Jesus is standing by the tombs of our lives, urging us to look inside and see a new beginning. He is calling us by name, reminding us that God is always present, always accessible, always offering us restoration and resurrection, in all our circumstances.

One of my favorite preachers and theologians, David Lose, reminded me this week that “the Easter word of hope and courage came first to people who did not take it for granted, who were mired in isolation and fear, and who could not imagine what life would now be like.” Perhaps this Easter service, stripped of the “traditions and rituals that we hold dear for many good reasons, [...] may remind us that God has never promised that our worship services would always be grand, that our churches would overflow, that our economy [would] always be growing, that our health is guaranteed, or that our lives and future would unfold as we’d hoped and planned. God—in and through the incarnated, crucified, and risen Christ—has never promised any of that. Rather, at the heart of the Gospel is the promise that God is both with us and for us at all times and through all conditions. In sorrow or joy, triumph or tragedy, gain or loss, peace or fear, scarcity or plenty, God is present.

[...] God promises that, while always available to us, God meets us especially where we most need God (and often least expect to find God): in hardship, struggle, loss, and death. [...] No experience, no matter how difficult or awful [...] is truly God forsaken, because God is always where we most need God to be. And in the resurrection, God promises that all the harsh realities of this life—hardship, struggle, loss, fear, disease, hunger, death—these realities – though painful they most certainly are—do not have the last word. Rather, the resurrection promises that God’s light is more powerful than darkness, that God’s love is stronger than hate, and that the life God offers through Christ prevails over all things, even death itself.”¹

Friends, this is the good news of the gospel: Jesus is alive, calling us to life; Jesus knows us and loves us and calls us by name. “Like the disciples of old, may we hear [our names] anew and find the faith and courage to not simply survive but also to flourish. [May we remember] that this small gathering of disciples, once they were called and named and sent by Jesus, changed the world.”² May that be just what happens once again. Amen.

¹ David Lose, “Easter A 2020—A Very Different Easter” ... *In the Meantime* blog, posted April 8, 2020. <https://www.davidlose.net/2020/04/easter-a-2020-a-very-different-easter/> Accessed April 8, 2020.

² Ibid.