



ST BART'S

A Sermon by
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I Heard the Lord Call My Name

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, March 27, 2016
The Day of Resurrection: Easter Day—Based on John 20:1-18

Years ago I was driving on a rural dirt road in Darlington County, South Carolina, looking for an old family tombstone. I came around a bend at the Black Creek Baptist Church and there I saw a sign. It read: "This road ends in a cemetery." I ripped off this checkbook slip (holds up a bank slip) and wrote on the front: "All roads end in a cemetery."

.... All roads end in a cemetery: Gettysburg, Pearl Harbor, Iwo Jima, Pork Chop Hill, Selma, The Stonewall Inn, Wounded Knee, the World Trade Center, Bagdad, Newtown, Brussels. Every road ends in a cemetery ... every road except one. It's the Easter road. It's the road that leads to the cemetery and goes through it and out the other side into new life. It's the road on which Jesus walked, the Via Dolorosa, the journey to Calvary and beyond to an empty tomb.

Jesus' death is cosmic and world-shaking. But for Mary, the mother; Mary Magdalene; the other women; and for eleven disciples it was immensely personal. Jesus of Nazareth, the son of a carpenter, the friend of Lazarus, Martha and Mary, was crucified, hung on a Roman cross in the city dump outside the old walls, and died.

No one else in this universe could do that for him. Indeed, no one else can do that for you or for me. Death is cosmic, it's universal, but at the same time, it is the most personal reality I know.

This past year, I re-read an account of this personal reality. The book is titled: "I Heard the Owl Call My Name."

It's a story about a young Anglican priest whose bishop sends him to a Native-American village called Kingcome — which is in present-day British Columbia, Canada.

After a short period in the village it turns out that the young priest is dying, but he doesn't know it. He learns that the villagers believe that a person always knows when his or her death is imminent because the person will hear the owl call her or his name. When you hear the owl call your name, that is a very personal announcement of your death. It's both frightening and comforting at the same time... comforting in the sense of knowing yourself to be a unique gift of God.

.... Good Friday is the day you hear the owl call your name!

And while that's true, there's another aspect to this weekend's story that is universal and world-shaking, and it's also immensely personal.

Early Easter morning, Mary Magdalene was in the garden outside the tomb. Peter and John had already left, and she was alone. She had seen the empty tomb, but the empty tomb didn't prove anything to Mary except that her beloved friend was gone.

If you recollect the Gospel we just heard, it was only when she heard Jesus call her name — "Mary" — that she realized that he was risen, a living Christ, not a dead friend.

Easter came for Mary when she heard the Lord call her name.

To receive its blessing, let's look at the story more closely.

In the first cameo we see Mary Magdalene weeping (the Greek word actually means "wailing") in the garden. It's one of the most dramatic scenes in the entire Bible.

The risen Christ is well able to dry her tears, but she doesn't recognize him. As we watch from a distance, we want to say, "Mary, stop weeping, turn around and see that Jesus is alive! The answer to your sorrows is right next to you."

So we ask Jesus' question: "Why was she weeping?" Well, she had good reason to cry. She'd seen with her own eyes the brutality of crucifixion. She'd been denied the chance to prepare the body with the anointing of last respects. She wept because she feared grave robbers. She weiled because she was alone and abandoned. But chiefly she wept because she thought she had lost the only person who had ever shown her an ounce of love and respect. And so she weiled in grief and despair.

I wonder if the risen Christ is asking that same question of each of us: "Child, why are you weeping?" To be sure, there is a great deal to weep about in this world. Some may be weeping inside because of the past ... a former failure that lingers, guilt over a poor decision that continues to haunt, or weeping over some damage that another caused growing up. Maybe some others are weeping over something in the present ... A heavy responsibility that is weighing you down, a current relationship that is difficult, a present fear of some group or over some insecurity. And some weep about an unknown future ... a worry about what is ahead.

No wonder we weep! Until the risen Christ asks us: "Why?" Good question, "Why am I?" "Why am I worried?" "What is my angst?" This day announces that the Resurrection can put all these things into a new light. It tells us that we have been vindicated. It means that he has triumphed over death and that one day this same risen Christ will wipe away all the tears from our eyes.

In the first cameo Mary is weeping. In the second cameo, Jesus calls her by name — "Mary." It was in hearing her name spoken in a most personal way that she and we join the celebration around the world this day ... the joy of knowing that God's love is too strong to die on a cross, and it is present to us. It's the joy of knowing that Good Friday is not the last word.

In the first cameo, Mary weeps. In the second, she hears her name. In the third cameo, Mary is seen clinging to Jesus. In v. 17, we read that Jesus responded to her by saying, "Mary, you cannot hold me." I believe Jesus is saying to Mary—and to us—"do not cling to the past." Life will be very different now; nothing will be the same ... Don't cling to old insecurities, don't hold onto old mores that stifle growth, don't hold onto that which cannot save you.

The fourth and final cameo tells how Mary goes back to tell the others: "I have seen the Lord." And, so, I ask you this Easter, "Have you seen the Lord?"

+ I have seen the risen Christ take hold of a drifting young man and change him from a self-centered, self-reliant person into a fairly decent, faithful and caring adult;

+ I have seen the risen Christ heal some deep hurts wrought from childhood and teenage years ... child abuse, drugs, family violence and abandonment;

+ I have seen the risen Christ staring back at me through the eyes of a Haitian child with a bloated stomach and matchstick legs, as if to say: "We need each other";

+ I have seen the risen Christ bring new perspectives of love and mercy and welcome and inclusion to churches that otherwise would have stayed in a nice comfortable homogenized state;

+ I have seen the risen Christ encounter a woman I met at a spring party several years ago who was chronically ill, so bent and twisted in pain she could hardly walk. She had come to Texas from New York City. I learned that for thirty years she was a high-priced fashion model ... and I was astonished some weeks later when I saw pictures of her as a younger woman ... tall, statuesque, beautiful. Although once upon a time she had been baptized as a Christian, she told me that she had never really felt God's presence in her life. Over the course of visiting her in the hospital, she would plaintively ask why God had never revealed himself to her. I didn't offer a pious answer.

Later that year, her condition worsened so that her husband could no longer care for her. But a group of eight young women from the parish took over her needs. They were all professionals with demanding jobs and social lives, but they organized themselves so that one of them was there for two hours per day. They did the shopping,

prepared the meals, cleaned, did the laundry, sat with her, and as death approached, prayed with her. Just before she died, we gathered around her bed, and she said to me—with her cadre of friends around her—"You know, I said to you many months ago, that God has never revealed himself to me ... Well that has changed," as she looked around at the eight young woman surrounding her, and her caring husband. "God has come to me in a very special way; I will never be the same. I can now die with a great sense of peace and hope."

All roads end in a cemetery, except one. The way of the risen Christ leads to the cemetery, goes through it, and comes out the other side in resurrection. Good Friday is when we hear the owl call our name. Easter comes when we hear the risen Christ call our name.... "Mary, Leroy, Ralph, Elizabeth, Juan, LaQuisha." Amen.

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