

Sermon
Kirk of St James
Easter Sunday March 31st, 2024
Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

At Iona Abbey in Scotland they have an Easter Vigil. The night before Easter morning, they hold a late evening service and it begins with the entire inside of the Abbey pitch dark. Then suddenly from the back of the church flashes a glint of gold, a cross coming down the aisle and everything blazes into light. We had thought that the cross extinguished the flame of Christ's life but, it turns out the best was yet to come.

I would not have been as brave as Mary, to venture out into the darkness and travel to the tomb alone. Maybe she was just so wrung out emotionally that nothing feels like it holds much meaning. There is nothing left for her to feel. Eyes likely puffy from crying, her broken heart shattered she sees the open tomb and assumes the worst. Jesus' body has been stolen, so she runs to find help.

While the betrayal, arrest and crucifixion account in John show a Jesus who is in control, the aftermath of his death leaves chaos. Disciples running around, going in and out of the tomb, trying to figure out what is going on, and scratching their heads as they return home. It is the worst detective story in the Bible. In biblical studies there is something called the "criterion of embarrassment" which states that the inclusion of things that are embarrassing in biblical accounts make them more likely to be true, because otherwise why include them? Why have disciples running around? Why does Mary when she finally sees Jesus call him the gardener? Everyone in this story is so shaken they cannot think straight. Despite the lack of answers not everyone leaves the garden.

Mary stays, and she is weeping, broken and frightened by what has happened. None of it makes sense. Who has taken Jesus? Why take off the grave clothes? She goes and looks into the tomb for herself, and sees two angels. Instead of being terrified of the two people who suddenly appear she cries out her hearts fears "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Then one of the strangest things happens, she turns around, she looks into the face of Jesus and she does not recognize him. Instead she asks him the same question "...Tell me where you have laid him..." It is not until Jesus says her name that things become clear. When she hears her name spoken with the love and care of her friend and savior--it is then that she knows him.

Our names, and our nicknames are important. They speak to our identity and our being. When people forget our names it can hurt. When they are spoken in love or kindness, it can change our lives. One writer summed it up beautifully "Like Mary, we long to be known by God--to be held in Gods gaze, to be seen as God's love and desire and care." We want our lives to be known, the things that make us laugh and cry, our successes and failures, and our loves and losses. All of the things that make us who we are. Mary hears all these things about her life when Jesus speaks her name. That is part of the joy of Easter--being fully known and fully loved.

Nothing in this world can separate us from the love of God. Just like Mary our names and our lives are known. I once heard a past moderator of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, the Rev. Dr. Stephen Farris share a wonderful reflection on Easter. He told a story about a youth group where one of the leaders dressed up as a shepherd, gathered them around an imitation campfire and began to tell the story of the life of Jesus. Many of the youth did not know anything about him, one young man named Marty became increasingly interested as he listened. Dr. Farris said:

" As Pete (the leader) told the old, old story, Marty and the rest of the young people, followed Jesus to Jerusalem in their imaginations. They watched him heal the sick and give sight to the blind. They listened as the rulers plotted to destroy him and heard the tinkle of thirty pieces of silver, the purchase price of loyalty. They sat with Jesus at table in an upper room and followed him to a garden where he was betrayed by his friend, with a kiss. (Young people do understand the reality of betrayal by a friend.) With each passing episode Marty became more visibly distressed. They witnessed the trial, heard Peter deny Jesus and felt the lash of the Roman whip. They stood by the foot of the cross and in deepest silence watched him die. Marty was transfixed. When Jesus, betrayed and abandoned, drew his last shuddering breath, Marty could take it no more. He cried out in sorrow, "Oh, mannn!" A young person from the church, someone who knew the story, laid his hand on Marty's arm and said, "That's all right, Marty. It's not over yet." That's the Easter message. In a world of sorrow, pain and ultimately death, **it's not over yet.**"

What a beautiful story--it is not over yet. When Mary heard her name that day, that is the message she heard. She came to weep and say goodbye to a friend she thought she had lost forever. Instead she is able to greet him once more. The evil in the world did not overcome Jesus, nor did death. The love of Christ overcame all because he loves us, and he calls us by name. He still calls us by name because it is not over yet. We have a part to play in this ongoing story just as Mary and the disciples did. Let us celebrate with joy the fact that we are known, loved and called by name, and that we each have a role to play in this story! How do we live as Easter people in the world?