

WHEN EASTER CALLS YOUR NAME

Sterling UMC
April 4, 2010
John 20:1-18

Her name was Carol. She was the organist at her church. She was an outstanding musician, but she did something no organist should ever do. She overslept on Easter morning and missed the sunrise service.

She was so embarrassed. Of course the minister and the church forgave her. They teased her a little, but it was done lovingly and in good fun.

However, the next Easter, her phone rang at 5:00 in the morning. Jolted awake by the loud ringing, she scrambled to answer it. It was the minister, and he said, "Carol, it's Easter morning! The Lord is risen!...And I suggest you do the same!"

This morning the Lord calls your number. The Lord calls your name and the message is the same as it was on that first Easter morning, the Lord is risen! Jesus is alive! Death could not hold him. The tomb is empty. His body is not there. His morning as we gather in His house, as we sing our hymns of praise, as we offer up our prayers, as we hear His Word proclaimed, in everything we say and do we declare that Jesus is alive!

As I have reflected on the first Easter morning one thing has become very clear to me. Easter did not become real for Mary until it became personal, until Easter called her by name. When the Risen Christ said, "Mary," when it became a personal experience for her, then it became real, powerful, authentic, life-changing. And at that moment, Mary was resurrected, too! She too received new life.

Remember the story with me. On the Thursday night before Easter, Jesus was arrested on trumped-up charges. He was brutally beaten, rushed through a fixed trial held strangely in the middle of the night, and declared guilty. The next day, Good Friday, Jesus was crucified; he died, and was buried in a borrowed grave. And then on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb.

The stone that had been covering the opening to the grave had been rolled away. She looked inside. She was startled to see that his body was gone. She thought someone had broken into the grave and stolen it. She was crushed, heartbroken, devastated – "They crucified him, and now they have taken his body away. How could they be so cruel?" she cried.

But then she heard a noise behind her. She turned and saw the silhouette of a man. She thought it was the gardener – until he called her by name. "Mary," he said tenderly. She recognized that voice, and at that moment she ran headlong into Easter. She realized the truth. It was Christ!

His body had not been stolen. He had risen. He has conquered death! He had defeated evil. He had come back to life. He was resurrected. She had come to the tomb that Easter morning looking for a dead body and found, instead, a Risen Lord!

And with that discovery, Mary too was resurrected! No more weeping and wailing. No more heavy sighing. No more tears of sorrow. He sent her running and shouting the good news, "I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord! He is risen!"

On that Easter morning long ago, the key moment came when the Risen Lord called Mary by name. Well the Risen Lord is still speaking and he is calling your name and my name. Can you hear him? He is calling us by name. He is telling us that he has conquered death, and he promises that we too can be resurrected with him. He wants to share, with each of us the gifts that come when he resurrects us and gives us new life.

First of all the Risen Lord wants to share with us the joy of resurrection.

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb that morning filled with despair, but Easter changed all that. It gave her an amazing, indescribable joy. No more weeping and wailing. No more heavy sighing. No more tears of sorrow. He called her name and sent her running and shouting the good news: "I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord! He is risen!"

The psalmist says it so well in Psalm 30, "Weeping may endure for the night but joy comes in the morning." And then the psalmist goes on to say, "You turned my mourning in to dancing." That's what the resurrection did for Mary Magdalene. And that is what it does for us.

There was a woman in my former congregation who told me about a time when she was working with some children in a vacation Bible school class and trying to get them to memorize some Scripture verses. One little boy had been working on John 3:16. When it was his turn to share he stood up very proudly and confidently and stated: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have ever-laughing life." "Ever-laughing life!" But when you really think about it, that little fellow wasn't so far off. He may have gotten one of the words a little mixed up, but he had the message right on the money. What better way to describe the Christian life. Because of Easter, Jesus is alive and when we place our faith and trust in Him we can have "ever-laughing" life. Why? Because there is nothing in this world, including death, that can defeat us. And that is a marvelous source of laughter and joy.

Secondly the Risen Lord wants to share with us the encouragement of resurrection.

Bishop Kenneth Goodson loved to tell the story about a famous painting of the crucifixion that was placed on display in a downtown store window in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, during Holy Week one year. He said the depiction of the blood dripping from the crown of thorns was so real, you wanted to reach out and wipe it away.

Early one morning a businessman stopped to look at the painting. He was joined by a newspaper boy making his early deliveries. After a few moments of silence, the man turned to walk away, shaking his head, tears misting in his eyes, and muttering to himself, "What a pity! What a shame!"

The newspaper boy heard him, and as the man started to cross the street, the boy shouted after him: "Hey, Mister! Didn't you know? Haven't you heard? He ain't dead anymore. He's alive! He's alive!"

Sometimes the Good Fridays of the world do indeed make us shake our head and mutter, "What a pity. What a shame." But along comes Easter to remind us that there is no evil strong enough to keep him in the grave.

He will win! Goodness will win! Truth will win! Love will win! Ultimately, God will win! And through faith in God, the victory can be ours as well. If that doesn't encourage you, I don't know what will.

When our loved ones die and pass into that silent land, what hope do we have that we will ever see them again? None but the words of the risen Christ, who said, "I am the Resurrection and the life, those who believe in me, even though they die, yet shall they live: and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

That's the joy of Easter and the encouragement of Easter.

But there is one final thing the Risen Lord wants to share with us. Easter calls our name and gives us a mission. When Jesus called Mary's name in the garden tomb she immediately recognized him. "Teacher," she exclaimed as she ran and fell to her knees to worship him. I'm sure she wanted to grab hold of him and never let him go. But Jesus said to her, "Go find my brothers and tell them the good news. Tell them I am ascending to my Father, and your father, my God and your God." Mary saw that the stone had been rolled away; she heard his command, and then immediately did what the Lord commanded. She ran to go tell his disciples that he had risen. She ran shouting the good news, "I have seen the Lord!!"

That is also our mission. We have the greatest news of all eternity. How can we be silent and not share it with a world that so desperately needs to hear it? Here are so many people who are hurting, who don't know the joy that the living Christ can provide. There are so many people who live without hope, who yearn for a word of encouragement, encouragement that only the presence of our living Lord brings.

My friends that is the Easter message. Jesus is alive! And so I ask you how do you respond