

Easter Day
Church of the Good Shepherd, Silver City, NM

April 5, 2015
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Holy Names

Today above all days we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We celebrate victory over death; we celebrate the birth of hope in the midst of darkness, and we celebrate that when the final hand is played, and the all the chips are down, love wins the day. The process by which this comes about is stunning.

In this morning's Gospel narrative one person's experience is unlike any of the others. One could say that she undergoes a death and resurrection experience like none of the other disciples. In Archbishop Anthony Bloom's book, Beginning to Pray, he talks about names and the act of naming. The good Archbishop would say that those who sought Jesus' death failed to truly name Jesus. He was "the man accused," "the rabble-rouser," "the troublemaker," "the upstart from Galilee," "the deceiver of the people." He was one of a category, in a sense painted broadly with a brush fit for many people at once, leaving this particular one nameless and without identity. That same brush could easily paint the disciples who remained with the same colors of horror—they knew it and they were terrified...except for this one disciple of whom I speak.

Mary Magdalene loved Jesus enough to sacrifice a year's wages worth of perfume to anoint Jesus' feet. She loved not just a tittle—the Messiah, nor a category—a wonderworker, a teacher, a rabbi, she loved Jesus, the person of Jesus, the wonder of the man who is God. From a courage born of love she braves the Roman guard and goes to the tomb. Imagine her distress when the body, the last remaining element of the physical presence of the one she loved so dearly, was not there! She turns, and runs into Jesus. At first she categorizes him as well—thinking he is merely the gardener. Anyone could have been the gardener, and the gardener could have been anyone. She meets Jesus but fails to name him. Into the confusion and the categories, the vision blurred by grief and loss Jesus offers a name: "Mary!" He calls not just any woman, not just any disciple, but her, specifically her, with the name that only she bears. The power of the name cuts through all the anonymity, it breaks the loneliness of categories. It sets the stage for a real relationship, a personal one, an immediate one, one not based on hearsay or theology, condition or tradition but on the real, present and accessible presence of the one naming and named.

Names, says Archbishop Bloom, allow for a real relationship. Your first name identifies you as an individual within a group. Nobody else in my immediate family has the name of Paul. When my mother called out "Paul," there was no doubt to whom she referred.

And when she called out "Paul Randall," there was no doubt who was in trouble! Your last name identifies you as a member of a community. The family name of Moore that comes down to me traces its path from Scotland. It locates me in the Gordon clan, with a certain tartan, a certain history, a certain tradition of pain and glory. Then there are nicknames. My brother is larger and taller than I am, he always has been. We both he and I played High School basketball. His nickname was "Moose," because of his size. When I came along I was "Little Moose," because I was my brother's little brother in more ways than one. Nicknames may or may not accurately name us. They may bring out something important that is lost in our given names, or they may distort our self-perception by emphasizing something unimportant. More than our given names, they can be endearing or alienating.

But there is another name that each of us has. In the book of the Revelation of John the prophet tells of a name written on a white rock and given to the saints. It is a name known only to God and the person who receives it. It is incredibly more than just a label for a specific individual. It is your full, naked and unprotected presence with nothing hidden, nothing unknown, no unnamed elephants in the living room of prayer. It is a name that accurately captures the uniqueness of who you are before God. Perhaps the God who speaks to create spoke this name when you were created. I would like to think that when Jesus said, "Mary," what she heard was that mystical name. God the one who she thought was dead, distant, unavailable and gone is the One who is suddenly present to the most intimate core of her being. This is the God who calls her by her real name. For Mary the resurrection is not merely a theological category or idea, it is an encounter with the risen Lord in a personal life-defining moment.

Mary shows us that the resurrection is more than just an event that happened 2000 years ago. Let's go back to the beginning. Adam and Eve are in blissful harmony with God, with one another and with the Garden, but then the serpent tempts Eve and she starts to doubt God. Maybe God isn't all that we've taken God for. Maybe God isn't as trustworthy as we thought! A little fracture line of alienation begins to creep into her relationship with God, and then to threaten all of her relationships. She suddenly feels naked in front of Adam—she feels like she has something to hide. The couple feel like they have something to hide from God. From this time on they would prefer not the fellowship with God in the cool of the evening, but hiding in the bushes. God has lost the divine name. God is now only the judge, and they are the guilty ones.

When Jesus rises from the dead and seals the plan for redemption all that is alienated is set on the path toward reconciliation. When Jesus names Mary he invites her out of her brokenness, alienation and grief into a life-transforming relationship with the very ground of her being. We do not often think about God in this personal a sense. We think of God

as the Great Source of all things, infinite, and infinitely far away. We think of God as the great Judge who will hand down eternal sentences for our failing consciences. We often act as if God was the Cosmic Watchmaker who has built the world, wound it up for a time, and now stands aloof, watching, ready to intervene for the faithful if the prayer is said right, and always ready to punish evildoers (not us, of course!) but not really engaged. God is, at best, a nameless deity, and we trundle off to the divine cemetery with spices to preserve what remains of what has been lost. We continue to worship a nameless God as nameless faithful.

But the transformation of the world only happens in a personal, named, face-to-face relationship. We must do as Mary did. We must look fully into the tomb of our own brokenness, the ways we have destroyed relationships rather than built them up, the ways we have let our ego run roughshod over the world, the ways we have kept others nameless in order to keep them at arm's length. We must face our complicity in the brokenness of the world in which we live, all the ways we as a people have built our ivory towers on the backs of others and at their expense, all the ways we have kept whole groups of people as nameless, exploitable categories, all the ways we have felt entitled to more than our share of the goodies. Then, in the midst of the darkness, when we yearn for wholeness we know we do not have, in the silence God will speak our name—not our given names or our family names, and not any of our half-true nicknames, but the name that at its core, when spoken by God, brings to light the deepest truth of who we are.

And we must have a name for God, not the theological categories of our faith, not the labels we have put on the Almighty, but, as it were, our personal nickname for God, a name that springs from our deep desire to know God. Mary's was "Rabboni," "teacher," and when she speaks it she rises from the dead. She is lifted from being the mourning, alienated one to being the very first eye-witness to the resurrection. When I say, "first," I mean two things. Chronologically she is the first one who sees the risen Christ, but also, this becomes the event of first importance. This relationship becomes the cornerstone that explains who Mary Magdalene is.

It is when we hear that call and respond with our own name for God that real relationship begins. In real relationship there is hope in the darkness, in real relationship we have the assurance that when the final hand is plaid and the chips are all down love really does win the day! Like Mary, this will become the cornerstone of who you are. We will become eye-witnesses to the resurrection.

Today is the birth of real relationship. The Ground of your Being has given you a name. Right in the midst of your broken, crazy, life, here, the name that is YOU is spoken to you by the One who is All—and that makes all the difference.

If we are transformed when God calls us by name, when we call one another by name the World comes into relationship and we are healed. We have a hundred categories that we use that keep people nameless: Immigrants, Illegals, Druggies, The ones who live "over there," Cowboys, Cholos, Miners, Tourists. Conservatives, Liberals, Democrats, Republicans, Greenies... Can you begin to tease out their real name? Can you learn to see their real personhood and uniqueness? Can you hear their stories? Then, do you have the courage that God has with you? Can you call to them by their real name? Will you risk a real relationship? Can you offer to others the resurrection you know when God calls you by your real name?