



He Called Her Name

A Sermon for Northminster Church

Preached by Claire Helton

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Easter Sunday

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ² So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³ Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵ He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷ and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸ Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹ for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰ Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look^[a] into the tomb; ¹² and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³ They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴ When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵ Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,^[b] “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷ Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸ Mary Magdalene

went and announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord"; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Christ is risen!

Christ is risen indeed!

Jesus told a parable once about sheep who knew their shepherd's voice, who responded when they heard him call their name. "I am the good shepherd," he said. "A hired hand may watch the sheep for a few bucks, but he's not invested in how things turn out for the sheep, he doesn't love them, doesn't know their names. If the wolf came, the hired hand would turn tail and run, because the sheep aren't his, they don't really matter to him. That's not how it is with you and me. I am the good shepherd; my sheep know my voice, and I know them. I would give up my life for my sheep."

I wonder if this parable had been hanging in the air as Mary Magdalene tossed and turned, trying to sleep. It was one thing to *hear* a person make that kind of a promise. It was an entirely different, and unwelcome, experience to watch them keep it. Was the weight of the memory of this poignant parable too much to bear? The pledge of a love so invested, so secure, that it would open itself up to death - was it oppressive in the face of what she had now seen? She closed her eyes tighter to try to wipe the image of his broken body, his gaunt, tear-streaked face out of her mind. It didn't help.

Maybe that's why she rose before dawn, pulled her cloak close around her face, and slipped out into the darkness. Maybe she just needed to walk. Do you think she went to the tomb on purpose, or did she just allow her thoughts to wander as her feet instinctively led her to the place where she knew, deep down, she had unfinished business to tend to?

As much as she tried to block them out, Jesus' teachings, which had once sounded like a proclamation, like good news, now rang in her ears like questions without an answer as she walked the hills in the moonlight.

"I am the door?" That door seems to have closed.

"I am the way?" No, we've lost the path.

"I am the light?" That light has gone out.

Had he ever even said one true thing?

Unbidden, she heard his voice echo again in her memory, "I would give up my life for my sheep." *We didn't ask for that*, she thought, and then she caught herself, torn between resentment and love, anger and grief, and there on the hillside, Mary collapsed into a heap on the ground, and she wept.

When she regained her composure, she looked up and saw where her legs had carried her. And she knew she needed to be here. She walked through the garden toward the place where they had laid him to rest, and as she heard the birds greeting the first rays of sunlight, it seemed right to her that she would begin this day here. It was the first day of the new week, the first day of the first week they would each live without him. Being here, in this place of death, to greet the new day seemed fitting, an acknowledgement that even if and when the new days, weeks, years ahead brought with them the ability to move on, to embrace something new – whatever it might be – this grief was where that newness would begin. Already, his death had become one of those moments that splits time; dividing the events of her life into before and after. She wasn't ready to move on, but the whispers of the new day stirring around her reminded her that life *would* move on with or without her, come what may.

A gentle breeze whipped up her hair where her cloak had slipped down and as she adjusted it, she raised her head and allowed her eyes to rest on the stone that marked the entrance to the tomb. "Well, Shepherd," she breathed, "here you are."

Except – the next breath caught in her chest as she realized something was amiss. The stone was out of place. The tomb lay open, exposed. Her body was flooded, not with Easter joy, but with fear and dread. "Oh God," she uttered involuntarily, "what have they done?"

Too afraid of what morbid or grotesque scene she might find if she went any closer, Mary took off running, a thousand scenarios playing through her mind, each as bad as the next. And worst of all was the knowledge she carried under it all, that as a woman, there was nothing she could do about it on her own. No one had ever taken her seriously without a man by her side – no one, that is, except the man in the tomb – whose lifeless body she now feared had met with some cruel fate. Wasn't the cross cruel enough? And so, she ran. With each footfall she tried to reason with herself. Maybe it was just a wild animal; but no, the stone was too heavy. If not an animal, then who? The Romans? They loved to spit on all that was holy; had they come to desecrate the body, knowing it would silence the political agitators among the disciples? The horror of the thought stopped her dead in her tracks for a second, hands on her knees, gasping for breath. Then, shaking her head, she started up again. Maybe it was less malicious and more political: perhaps the Jewish leaders had heard where he was buried and had just moved the body somewhere they deemed more appropriate for a blasphemer. She would still be furious but at least she could expect they would have taken care with the body itself.

When she finally reached the house and caught her breath enough to speak, Peter and the other disciple were as alarmed as she had been. Before Mary had even had time to recover her breath, they were off again, the two men running neck and neck toward the tomb, weaving through the streets, dodging the shopkeepers setting up their wares for the workday that was about to begin. Mary took her time on the way back. She had been ready to encounter the quiet of the graveyard. She wasn't ready for this.

When she arrived, the two disciples were already inside the tomb, talking in hushed tones. Mary stood outside, looking in, relieved deep down in her bones not to see a mutilated body; at least it wasn't a tactic of fear. Mary heard Peter voice some of the same theories she had been considering; the other disciple seemed less anxious to put his thoughts into words. On the ground were the linens, the head covering was in Peter's bewildered hands. Why had they unwrapped him, whoever they were? None of them could make sense of it. The two men agreed to gather

as many of the disciples as could be found for a meeting that night to discuss what to do, and then they went on their way.

But Mary couldn't leave. She had started this day in grief. Grief was where she was ready to be. She resented that anger and fear now seemed to be doing battle with her sadness, that there was so much pain vying for her attention. The birds were still chirping but their melodies now sounded off-key. Whatever this was, it felt vile. She felt the hot tears again beginning to pour down her cheeks.

She bent over once more to look into the tomb and blinked back the tears, trying to clear her vision, to fully take in the scene. She knelt down under the arched entrance, and as she lowered her face toward the ground, using her sleeve to wipe her eyes, there was a flash of a feeling that something was different – as quick and surreal as *déjà vu* – but she brushed it away. There, on her knees, eyes still closed, Mary paused and took a deep breath, the first one she had had all day. And then, in an instant, she knew it was more than a feeling, and allowed the thought to finish forming: was there someone in the tomb? Her eyes fluttered open. The sight of two figures now crouching where Jesus' body had laid sent her rocking back on her heels, catching herself just before she completely hit the ground. Before she could speak, before she could think, the one closest to her quietly reached out and laid a hand mildly on her shoulder. "Woman," they said, "why are you weeping?" It was gentle, the way a parent asks a child, "Honey, tell me *why* you're crying." The gentleness in their voices was enough to soften her defenses.

"They've taken him away," she choked out, "and I don't know where they've put him." Something about the look in their eyes, the peace that emanated from them in the midst of her chaos, was a grounding point for all the tension she was carrying, and she broke. Stumbling forward into the tomb, Mary crumbled to the ground for the second time that day, pounding her angry, fearful fists into the earth between heaving sobs.

How long did she stay there, weeping?

When, finally, she grew quiet, she heard the footsteps behind her. Mary turned, half expecting to see Peter coming back to take in the scene once more. It wasn't Peter. As her body tensed, she could feel the resignation setting in. Would this be her posture from now on? Always on the defensive, bouncing from one fear to the next? She didn't even bother looking him full in the face. He asked about her tears, but having answered the question once already, she had lost her patience. Jesus had pursued Love even when it put him at odds with the wealthy, the powerful, the religious elite, the might of Rome itself. And while it was inspiring to watch while he lived; after watching him die – actually die – for it, the inspiration had melted into shame. The heat of embarrassment had been threatening to rise in her since the moment he breathed his last. How could they have all been so foolish?

“Listen,” she began through gritted teeth, “if you are the one who took him just tell me where you’ve put him. I’ll bring the body back myself.”

A pause. And then, he called her name.

“Mary.”

She felt it, more than she heard it, and it felt like a rising, lifting her to her feet.

“Mary.”

It was the sound of her Shepherd, the one she had followed all the way to the grave.

“Mary.”

It was the weakness of death and the power of life intermingled in the voice of Love calling her forth, calling her out of the tomb.

She believed it, and she didn't, all at once. Before she even looked up at his face, she glanced once more back behind her, into the tomb, thinking her mind was playing tricks, thinking it couldn't be real – because it can't be, because it's impossible.

And in that moment, when she turned back from the tomb and walked forward, looking full into the face of Love Arisen, a miracle occurred. Mary left her resignation behind like graveclothes on the ground, as Jesus called her out of the tomb and into a resurrected hope.

“Teacher!” she breathed, as she stepped forward into the light.

People of God, Love has overcome the grave. Whatever holds you back, whatever graveclothes bind you, cast them off! Leave them behind. Come forth.

This is our sacred story. Christ is risen!

Christ is risen, indeed.