

“Name Calling”

Scripture: John 20:1-18

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All too often we only see what we expect to see. And Easter claims us only as we glimpse the divine in the unexpected.¹ Consider what Mary Magdalene expected to see that first Easter morning. Early that Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene approached the tomb. She expected to find the body of Jesus. She assumed that the body would be there. After three days of death, she was looking for a corpse with the onset of rigor mortis...the beginning smell of decay...cold flesh.

When she finds the tomb empty, her response is that the body has been taken away. Since dead bodies don't move on their own, her assumption is that the body has been removed. She sees only what she expects to see.

Lest we be too hard on Mary, let us remember that is how we all see—we see only what we expect to see. There is a famous psychology study of perception, the way we see things. As part of the study, volunteers were asked to identify slide pictures of playing cards. Nothing difficult...just identifying the cards. So, for example, the volunteer would view a slide picture of the two of clubs, and would identify the card.

However, among the slides was a picture of a black ace of hearts...black ace of hearts. Invariably, people would identify say: “Ace of spades.” Even when the examiner would say, “Are you sure? Look again.” the answer was the same: “Ace of spades.” This black ace of hearts was seen as the ace of spades. We see what we expect to see.

On that Easter morning Mary Magdalene at the tomb sees only what she expects to see. Indeed, she meets a man in that garden that contained the tomb. Who else would be out that early in the morning? Clearly, it must be the gardener, who tended the grounds. But it is Jesus that stands before her.

Then Jesus spoke to her: “Mary.” “Mary.” As Jesus spoke her name, she recognized him. When he called her by name, she knew him. Her assumptions are shattered. Her perception of reality now incorporates the divine. The Easter experience takes place as our eyes are opened, as we, like Mary, see more than we expect. Eyes are opened as we hear our name called out.

There are graceful episodes of life, where we hear our named called out. Indeed, there are some experiences of hearing our names that have a sort of mystical or providential aura to them. Don Miller has written an extremely interesting and provocative book, *Blue Like Jazz*, a very 21st century reflection about faith. Don tells of conversation with a young woman who was named “Plenty” by her parents, both hippies in the 1960's. Plenty was raised in a home where there was no belief in God. But Plenty had become a Christian. She had changed her name to Penny. So Don Miller wondered how it happened? (*Blue like Jazz*, pp.48-49)

1 Revision of sermon preached 4/11/93 FN: jn20-1.93

“Now you have to promise to believe me,” says Penny.

“Promise what?” Don says.

“Okay, but I’m not crazy.” She takes a deep breath. “I heard God speak to me.”

“Speak to you?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“He said, ‘Penny I have a better life for you, not only now but forever.’” When Penny said that she put her hand over her mouth, as if that would stop her from crying.

“Really, God said that to you?”

“Yes,” Penny talked through her hand “Do you believe me?”

“I guess.”

“It doesn’t matter whether you believe me or not... That is what happened. Don, it was crazy. God said it... I kept asking Him to say it again, but He wouldn’t. I guess it’s because I heard Him the first time, you know.”

Don then asked her if that is when she became a Christian. She said no, and he asked why. She said “I was drunk and high, Don. You should be sober when you make important decisions.”

“That’s a good point,” said Don, but he still thought she was bit crazy. “So what happened next?”

“Well,” said Penny, “A couple of nights later I got on my knees and said I didn’t want to be like this anymore. I wanted to be good, you know. I wanted God to help me care about other people, because that’s all I wanted to do, but I wasn’t any good at it.” And that’s when Penny became a Christian.

A graceful moment for Penny...but graceful moments of hearing our name are not always so dramatic. Some are mundane and common. Some have heard their name called as Jane did. Jane had closed off her life after Hugh’s death. Oh, she continued to go to church. She dropped out of the couple’s class, since she was not a “couple” anymore. She was resolved to live quietly, but she did not know what she would do. Until she happened by the nursery of the church. She had gone right at intersection of hallways, instead of left quite unintentionally. She had made the wrong turn, ending up by the church nursery. She heard the crying of an infant, but in that cry, she heard her name: “Jane, Jane.” That infant was calling her name.

She stepped into the church nursery. She took the child that was crying, that was crying what seemed to her: “Jane, Jane.” Today, Jane not only co-ordinates her church’s nursery, but she has become a business woman, running a day-care center with an annual budget of close to a half-million dollars per year. In the cry of a baby in the nursery, Jane heard her name. It was graceful encounter with the calling of her name.

And then there is Hank. Hank had not gotten along with his sister Sally since high school. Each had held on to grudges that still seethed with bitterness. Even at the funeral for their mother, each could only agree not to fight out loud.

As Hank was getting off the airplane from yet another business trip, he saw them meet. “Them”—a

man, waiting at the gate, peering at each passenger that exited and a woman disembarking and eyes searching the crowds. The man waiting yelled, “Hey, Sis!” and she dropped her bag, rushed to hug his neck. And in observing that embrace, a voice said: “Hank, that could be you.” “Hank, that could be you.”

It was a graceful encounter by name—the encouragement Hank needs to seek reconciliation with Sally.

And then I am not sure where to put my own experience. I haven’t had one of those mystical experiences but it may be that I need to have my hearing checked out. After three years in seminary, I spend four years finishing a Ph.D. at Duke University, but I knew that I wanted to be a pastor. So before completing my dissertation, I began interviewing with church search committees: a two-hundred-fifty member congregation in Columbus, Georgia...a similar-size congregation in Roanoke, Virginia. Sheri had just graduated from nursing school, so we took short vacation to Florida. On the way back to North Carolina, we dropped in, unannounced at a presbytery office in Jacksonville, FL. The presbytery executive, who had never met us, convinced the two of us to make a three hour detour to the west as the way to go back to North Carolina...to a little county seat town of Live Oak, Florida. There was a church seeking a pastor...a church of 50 members, worried about survival. The presbytery executive made a phone call to have someone meet us to show us around. When we got to Live Oak, the entire search committee was waiting on us. We knew nothing about each other: they did not have resume; I had never heard of Live Oak.

We begin this conversation about call. We go back to North Carolina. The search committee says, “Come back and visit with us again.” We fly down this time. We meet the search committee and the Session—at this point we know half of the congregation. We fly back, with layover in Atlanta. Sheri and I are talking about the experience...how wonderful it all felt but Live Oak was not the place. The Columbus church had 250 members and growing...even without a called pastor. The Roanoke church was in such a beautiful setting. And a Duke Ph.D. doesn’t go to 50 member churches. But the experience in Live Oak was so wonderful. There in the airport, in the midst of this conversation, we both heard the airport page: “Paging passenger William Pender...step to nearest service desk.” I stepped up, answering the page. There had been no page for William Pender. I had them check again. I was sure that’s what I heard...Sheri is sure she heard too...we think?

That’s was not the deciding point but it has always made us both wonder: do we have ears for God’s call? We ended up in Live Oak, Florida.

Like Mary Magdalene, any of us may have graceful encounters with our names that break through our assumptions, letting us see the divine.

But every encounter with our name that breaks through our perceptions and assumptions is not an experience of grace. As the old saying goes, “All that glitters is not gold.” There are some encounters with the calling of our name that captivate us, but are not graceful. There are some encounters with our name that are risky and dangerous.

With any cursory following of the news, we could name someone who heard God calling them by

name to do something outrageously wrong: Jim Jones from many years ago...Erik Rudolf and the bomb at the Olympics...some mother or father who kills their own children. But instead of following the lead of news reporters who describe this as religion run amuck, I would say that their encounter with the hearing of their names was not tested by the community of faith, by the church tradition, by a full reading of Scripture.

Every encounter with our name that breaks through our perceptions is not graceful. How do we discern the graceful callings of our names from those that are dangerous and harmful? Again, let Mary Magdalene be our guide. Mary went to the disciples and she told them of her encounter: "I have seen the Lord." In other words, you try out that hearing of your name on the community of faith, as Mary did. For—and this is key—every encounter with our name is not graceful.

I cannot make a recording and give you the tape that has God calling your name. There is no formula, no sure-fire technique of hearing your name called. By and large, people have continued to hear that call as they participate in the life of the church, in worship, service, and education. And they continued to test out their hearing of their named called here.

Jesus is risen, and no one can control where his graceful presence will be found, where his voice will be heard. Mary Magdalene herself tried to grab on to the one who called her by name. She sought to assure his presence with her.

Jesus refuses to let her hold on to him. Not because he did not care, but rather because he would no longer be limited to a physical body. His voice now can be heard in drugged-induced state, in the cry of baby, in an embrace at the airport, in a garbled page in the airport, and even in the church!

Jesus is loose among us, and there no telling where he will call us by name. I am reminded of one of the better dramatic productions of the life of Christ: Franco Zefferelli's production called "Jesus of Nazareth." Where this production is lacking—where I suppose all such dramas fail—is in the depiction of the resurrection. How can one put on film what was too powerful for human senses?

One of Zefferelli's stabs at handling the resurrection is to have one of the Jewish leaders enter the empty tomb on Easter morning. This Jewish leader, a made-up character, had played a major role in orchestrating Jesus' crucifixion by the Romans. He also had overseen the placement of Roman guards as well as Jewish observers there at the tomb, lest the disciples come and steal the body of Jesus and say: "Jesus has risen." His plans have gone awry. The tomb is empty.

As he enters the tomb, see its emptiness, he mutters to himself: "Now it begins. Now it begins."

It began...it began on Easter morning and continues today: the risen Christ is loose in the world, to call names: Mary, Jane, Hank, Tom, Alice, Dan, Lisa, you, and me. Christ is loose in the world...now it begins!