

April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

CALLED BY NAME

I was having lunch with a group of fellow pastors awhile back when we got into a conversation about the special challenges of the Easter sermon. Some in the group have preached more than 30 Easter sermons. This is my 10th. I was so relieved to hear them say out loud things that have troubled me every Easter. It is the most important Sunday of the year. It was the most important event in all of history, since the beginning of time. Literally. I know people say literally all the time now when they don't mean literally. This is literally. People come to church on Easter hungry for the good news that is Easter. And let's face it, you are probably going to have people sitting in the pews who are not there every Sunday, or every other Sunday, or once a month, or pretty much any other Sunday except maybe when Christmas Eve falls on Sunday. Whoever is here, for whatever reason they're here, preachers want to feed them. Preachers want people to get a taste of what it is like to be filled with the Spirit.

On the night before he died, at the last supper, Jesus told the disciples not to worry because he would send the Spirit so that they would never forget everything he had taught them. (Jn. 14:26). He told them to go and be teachers so that everyone could learn the wonderful, amazing, beautiful things that he had taught them.

We preachers want so much to share that every time we preach and it is always the challenge. But Easter is the greatest challenge. I can't tell you how relieved I was to hear those preachers who have been doing it a lot longer than I have put my own fears about Easter sermons into words.

So, this is it. Fair warning. I cannot do this subject justice. It is too big. Too amazing. Too wonderful and wonderful.

Alleluia he is risen. He is risen indeed. That is the one great truth that brings us together here today. It is the one core understanding that grounds our faith. As the Apostle Paul said in the first letter to the Corinthians, if Christ has not been raised then our faith has been in vain. It is the resurrection that makes us who we are.

Don't get me wrong. Our intellect, the brains that evolved over millions of years to make us into conscious, rational human beings, unique among all the animals on the planet, absolutely have trouble with it. We have to ask "how can it be?" Anyone who has never had doubts about it has never really thought it through. But something happened. Something caused those first disciples to proclaim it. Something made this strange new religion spread like wildfire. Strange, not because of this inexplicable notion of resurrection. Strange because, it calls for peace and justice and putting the greater good of the community ahead of personal ambition.

There is an expression we use to describe something really big – something that has far-reaching implications and repercussions. We say it is an event of cosmic proportions. Well, Easter really is such an event.

But here is the kicker. It is also small and intimate. It is Peter and John running to see when they hear that the tomb is empty. It is John experiencing such an irrational mix of emotions that he can't go into that empty place where he knows the body was laid. He can only stand in the doorway and look in. It is Peter, not stopping to think at all running straight into the tomb itself.

It is Mary Magdalene lingering at the place after Peter and John leave. There was no point in staying there crying her eyes out. But she did; weeping inconsolably but instantly consoled, her tears become tears of joy when he calls her by name.

The very first words of the risen Lord are just between the two of them. He says:

Woman, why are you weeping?

She doesn't know him when he calls her woman. She thinks he's the one who has taken the body.

Then Jesus said to her Mary! And then she knew. She knew who he was and without having to think it through. Without saying to herself "wait a minute, how can this be?" Her brain didn't have to process anything. She knew him because he called her by name.

And then it was all OK. More than OK. It was fantastic beyond all words. So fantastic that she doesn't just sit down and enjoy the moment. She doesn't kneel and pray quietly by herself. He says don't hold on to me, go tell the others. And that's what she does. She runs back again, without stopping to think how it's going to sound. She runs to the house where the others are still cowering in the shadows and she speaks the unbelievable words of truth: "I have seen the Lord."

Did you ask yourself before you came today why you were coming? Why get up early on this beautiful spring morning to come to church? Tradition or faith or both, or neither? There probably isn't a rational explanation.

Of course nothing I say can make you believe this, but whether you know it or not, we are all here for one reason. God brought us here. Christ called us, each and every one of us, by name. He calls us to join him at the table. He calls us to follow him, join him as he goes about healing the shattered, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless. He calls us to love one another as he loves us.

And just for the record, since maybe possibly someone here doesn't already know this, here are some things he does not call us to do: he doesn't call us to shame or judge others; he doesn't call us to neglect his creation, he doesn't call us to go to war, he doesn't call us to put personal greed or ambition ahead of the

greater good. But when we do those things that he does not call us to do, he always forgives and calls us back to him. That is why we use the tired old phrase “the Good News of Jesus Christ.”

Sometimes our brains get muddled with doubts and worldly things and we don't hear him call us. We don't recognize him with us. But wherever we are, he is calling us by name. When we struggle with the hardships of life, when we feel the pain of guilt be it a failed relationship or a failed career, or a failure of moral character, he is there calling us. And when we hear him, we can stop weeping. The darkness is replaced by light, evil is overcome, God's love for the world has prevailed and we are all safe and fortified because Christ is risen. Tears of sorrow become tears of joy.

The risen Christ doesn't wait for you to make sense of him; he comes to you, calls you by name, and gives you what you need to join in the Easter chorus: Christ is risen! Alleluia. Give Thanks. Amen.