

Bishop Keith

Easter Sermon, 12 April 2020

Acts 10:34-43 John 20:1-18.

All four gospels have women coming early in the morning to the tomb of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene is among them.

Only John focuses on her encounter with Jesus.

It is an extraordinarily beautiful narrative.

Though we are told in John about the visit of the other two men, Peter and the beloved disciple, it is on the personal encounter with Mary that we are invited to focus.

Deliberate suspense is woven into the telling.

Mary is distressed, very distressed:

Not only has she seen the most terrible death inflicted on the man of all men who did her the greatest kindness, Luke tells us she is the woman who was delivered of 7 evil spirits by Jesus,

She is now distressed that even in his death, and she has seen him die, the simplest and most basic expressions of love and respect cannot be given by her to him, anointing his body with oil.

The angels ask her why she is weeping, and she says "they" have taken away my Lord and she doesn't know where.

When you are feeling at your most powerless and forsaken it is as if you have been kicked in the teeth again.

Then the mysterious figure appears who she thinks is the gardener; in an extraordinary touch, she gently accuses him of taking the body, and pleads with him to allow her to know where, so that she can simply come to do what she can for him even in the aloneness of his death and burial.

And then the man speaks her name.

Mary

It is as if the whole gospel comes to a standstill at that moment.

Mary

A realisation of a new reality in the universe dawns on this woman from Magdala in Galilee.

Mary

By simply calling her name Jesus expresses the full meaning of his love for her, even delight in astonishing her, and he enables her to know, that all she imagines as the worst, is over.

She uses the name of respect and authority by which he would always have been addressed "Rabboni", the Hebrew.

But using his name is not enough, she reaches out as we would do when we see the sight of someone we believed we would never see again.

If you have ever seen those videos on You Tube of the father who comes home from the war and surprises his children in their school, and the children wide eyed come to fling their arms around him.

But Jesus says "Don't hold on"; there is more in this moment.

Jesus is Jesus, the same man risen, but he is to ascend. And even as he has undone her world, he invites her into a new world, in which the reality of this new life will be Jesus, in union with the Father. So, his Love and Lordship are fused into one glorious reality, and all who will believe are invited into that union, beginning with Mary, "my God and your God".

And so, she, Mary, becomes the apostle to the apostles "I have seen the Lord".

We are told later this narrative is written so we too may believe. Is it fanciful then to imagine our names being spoken by Jesus as he extends that same invitation to us?

Keith, Jane, Tim, Jeremy, Sarah

Your name.

He is Lord, even as He is Love; as Peter says to Cornelius "Lord of all", the one, the same one who speaks Mary's name, is the one who will judge the living and the dead and in whose name the forgiveness of sins can be received.

I think Mary, even in hearing her name, is intuitively given an understanding of these things even though the other apostles will spend their lives spelling it out and forming new communities of believers all over the known world.

That ancient world was no stranger to the kind of sickness that has overtaken our world. There will be time ahead to speak and wonder as to what this devastation means even as we cry out to God that those who do not have the amazing health care we receive in this country, may be spared.

But the moment of new beginning Mary encountered in the face of her risen Lord, is still a moment offered to us in our world as it was offered to her in hers. Whatever our condition can we this Easter of all Easters listen out for his word of invitation to his new beginning?

In a moment we will be invited to say the creed, the ancient summary of the conviction about Jesus and the truth of God the Church formed in a time when their culture believed none of these things. I hope in our own day we can express that same faith, the faith into which Mary came when she heard her name and accepted the invitation.

This has been the faith of all Christians down the years; of Mother Teresa in Calcutta speaking as Jesus would do to them, the names of

those dying on the streets; of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who 75 years ago on Maundy Thursday was executed for that same faith in a German concentration camp, a faith he received and made his own in his teens at the time of his confirmation. In the confirmation services which would have marked our Easter celebration in more normal times I would say to each one being confirmed

"God has called you by name and made you his own"

I hope it is our faith, yours and mine, taking our cue from Mary. In Jesus risen from the dead, who comes to us and speaks our name, inviting us into life, life eternal.

Amen.