

Who are you looking for?

Easter Weekend! April 8-9, 2023

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John 20:1-18

¹Early 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. ²So 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.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and 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. ¹³They 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.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus 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.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus 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.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

We’ve spent Lent seeking God and asking honest questions. This resurrection day, we trust the Risen God finds us. We don’t have to go on and on seeking, looking, wondering. We trust God knows us by name and loves us intimately, just the same.

Beloved of God, rejoice together with the ancient greeting! Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

We can imagine Mary's grief. Any of us who have wept at a graveside, know the emotion. The angels ask: "Woman, why are you weeping?" We feel her desperation. We can hear her short breaths through her tight chest as she answers. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Yet the next question comes from a familiar yet unknown voice, "Who are you looking for?"

Who are you looking for? As a community of faith who values growing ever deeper with God, we've spent the last 6 weeks asking "Seeking" questions. We've sought out God. We've sought God's answers to questions like, 'Who will you listen to? How do we begin again? Can these bones live?' These questions have left their mark on our hearts with new insights about ourselves and God whom we worship.

Today, Jesus himself, draws close to a woman who loves him at the moment of her deepest need and asks another question. "Who are you looking for?"

Who are we looking for?

I'm guessing that many of us played the old beloved game of Hide-and-Seek when we were youths? Yes? Go back in your memory bank and remember that thrill of running to find the best hiding spot. Can you feel your heartbeat in your chest as we did our best to not move and not breathe? We hoped that the one seeking – the finder – would walk on past us. Yet there were times when we giggled, or the branch crackled and our perfect hiding spot was blown. We were discovered – found as it were. Depending on our competitiveness, we might feel like we weren't good enough.

Resurrection friends, here's the truth! The truth we always get to rest in. God wants to find us. God seeks us out and does find us. Period. Always. God finds us. God forgives us and God frees us to love and serve.

Seeking God is good for our souls. Wrestling with God and asking the hard questions makes for humility and spiritual growth. Yet, there comes a time when we can stop searching and trust Jesus is with us. The Easter story shows us Jesus knew Mary needed to be found. And He was there.

For He asked her the question. “Who are you looking for?” The last she knew, Mary had seen her Lord die on the cross. Now Mary needed to see Jesus alive. Jesus knew Mary would have to experience being found by the living Jesus. He called her by name.

This is not some game God plays with us. God doesn’t play games. This is where the open tomb meets real life. God seeks us out and loves us. God gives us the strength we need in the moment we need it! Just ask any mom who is exhausted by caring for her kids. Or a veteran who has taken cover in a bunker. Or a doctor who prays for guidance before performing a life-threatening surgery. Or ask yourself, when has God searched you out and found you in your time of need?

If Jesus’ encounter with Mary in the garden tells us anything, we know that we don’t have to persistently search for God, or look continually for God and God’s approval. God is already here! God finds us, forgives us and frees us to love and serve. God calls us by name in our moments of deepest need.

There was an orphan girl adopted by a loving family. Upon arriving at the home, her new parents told her a responsibility was to keep her room clean. Earnestly desiring to be accepted, each day, her room was immaculate. She would sit on the bed and say, “My room is clean. Can I stay? Do you still love me?”¹

She was understandably looking for people to love her. But she didn’t understand the unconditional love of new parents who had already found her, accepted her and would still love her even if her room occasionally got messy. How often we put those same expectations upon God. “If I get it right, will God love me and keep me?”

Who are we looking for? The Resurrected Christ who has already found us. In our moments of deepest need, and in ordinary times, we too, can stop searching and seeking and trust God already accepts us, rooms clean or not.

If you are here today and wonder whether this God is for you...if you wonder if God loves you...if you wonder that God will really show up for you...hold a little seed of faith in your heart that it’s true. For I can tell you every person in this room has a story. A time when God showed up for them in a messy divorce, an unexpected health scare, the death of a pet or running to catch a plane. As I myself, lay in the Emergency Room recently, weeping and scared, a faithful and wise pastor said to me, “In God’s love, we have nothing to fear.”

You can doubt no more. Believe it! Christ is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

The resurrected Christ we love and celebrate this day, means that now Jesus is not constrained to a physical body. He is alive and loose in the world, sitting with us in our living rooms, at the coffee shops and out on the hiking trails. Jesus is with us at the office, or on the front lines, and in the refugee camps. God finds us. God forgives us and God frees us to love and serve.

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed!

Now, Bob, Sandra, Don, Debbie, Christ calls you by name.

Then Jesus told Mary to “go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” In other words, don’t keep this incredible news of new love and eternal life to herself! Our job is the same as Mary’s was to tell everyone that God is Risen. Death doesn’t win the day. We will have life after this life! Jesus is for us! God comes to us where we are, no matter what we’ve done or not done, just as we are, and loves us unconditionally. Amen.

1 <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2018/september/fearful-adopted-child-finds-unconditional-love.html>