

John 20:11-18
 April 4, 2010 Easter Sunday

Hampton Baptist
 Charles R. Smith

“When Easter Gets Personal”

A Sunday School teacher asked her class on Palm Sunday if they knew what happened on Easter, and why it was so important.

One little girl spoke up saying: "Easter is when the whole family gets together, and you eat turkey, sing about the pilgrims and all that."

"No, that's not it," said the teacher.

"I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you get a tree, decorate it, give gifts to everybody, and sing lots of songs."

"Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher.

Finally a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, put in a tomb, and left for three days."

"Ah, thank goodness somebody knows," the teacher thought to herself.

But then the student went on: "Then everybody gathers at the tomb and waits to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow, he has to go back inside, and we have six more weeks of winter."

People have differing ideas about Easter; the child was a bit *confused*, to say the least. For some, Easter is a time to get new clothes and to hunt Easter Eggs. For others, it is a time for a visit from the Easter Bunny. Still, for others it is a time to come back to church, a holy day to be with family and friends.

Easter carries varied connotations, probably as diverse as the population which holds these meanings. Some today have come to visit the church of their childhood, much like attending a High School Class Reunion, basking in the feeling of the familiar. Some perhaps have chosen to attend today, because of the beauty of the lilies and this sanctuary and want to be in a church somewhere. The children with new clothes, the triumphant music, seeing out-of-town family members and friends, all combine for a great time to be together. But this is not the true meaning of Easter.

It is important to notice in our scripture text that Easter did not become *real* for Mary until it became *personal*, until Easter called her by name.

When the Risen Christ called her by name... when He said, "Mary," when it became a personal experience for her... then it became real, genuine, powerful, authentic, life-changing... and at that moment, Mary was resurrected, too! At that moment, she also received new life.

The flow of today's service intentionally has sought to recall the story. On the Thursday night before Easter, after leaving the Upper Room where he shared his Last Supper with the disciples, Jesus faced agony alone in the Garden of Gethsemane and later was arrested on trumped-up charges. He was brutally beaten, rushed through a fixed trial which was held strangely in the middle of the night... and was declared guilty. The next day, Good Friday, Jesus was crucified and buried in a borrowed grave.

And then on Easter Sunday morning, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found the stone rolled away from the entrance. She ran to get Simon Peter and John. They entered the tomb and then returned back to their homes.

But Mary stood outside the tomb crying. When she finally looked inside, she was startled to see that his body was gone. She thought someone had vandalized the grave and stolen the corpse.

Mary was crushed, heart-broken, devastated. “They crucified Him... and now they have taken His body away. How could they be so cruel?” she cried. But then, she heard a noise behind her. She turned and saw the silhouette of a man. She thought it was the gardener... until He called her by name.

“*Mary,*” he said tenderly. She *recognized* that voice... and at that moment she ran head-long into Easter. She *realized* the truth. It was Christ. His body had not been stolen after all. He had risen. He had conquered death. He had defeated evil. He had come back to life. He had been resurrected.

She had come to the tomb that Easter morning looking for a *dead* body and found instead a *Risen* Lord. And with that discovery, Mary was resurrected, too! No more weeping and wailing; no more heavy sighing; no more tears of sorrow. He sent her running and shouting the good news: “I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord! He is Risen!!”

On that Easter morning long ago, the key moment came when the Risen Lord called Mary by name. On this Easter morning, the Risen Lord is still speaking, and He is calling your name and mine. Can you hear Him? He is calling us by name telling us that He has conquered death and that He wants to share with each one of us *personally* that He loves us. He wants us to know the power of resurrection, that through Him, we can overcome whatever it is that plagues us.

But for Jesus to be real to us, for us to know the power of the resurrection, Easter has to get personal. When Mary heard Jesus call her name, when the Risen Lord became *real* to her, she ran to tell her friends. Jesus told her not to hold onto him, but to go and tell others. When she told the disciples of the resurrection, Mary Magdalene became the first evangelist. Jesus chose a *woman* to be the first evangelist.

Today, Jesus is calling *your* name. Easter can only be *real* to you when Easter gets personal. If you’ve had a personal experience with Jesus, you will recognize his tender voice. Coming to this sanctuary is good, but not fulfilling without a personal relationship with Jesus. Seeing the beauty of this place and enjoying the warm fellowship which we cherish are not the primary reasons to be in church today.

Our lives are *changed* when Easter gets personal. Jesus loved you and me as individuals so much that he died for us. But the message of Easter is greater than that! The love of God is so powerful that not even death could contain Jesus Christ. He rose from the dead, because he loves you. Easter is personal to me, because of my relationship with the risen Lord. I want you to be able to run head-long into Easter; to do so, Easter has to get personal. So, how personal do you take Easter?

For what are you *looking* this Easter? Do you have childhood stories of Easter that are still confusing? Is the Easter story more than a *story* to you? For what are you *looking* this Easter? New clothes, colored eggs? Have you come to the celebration because of the beauty of this place? Mary went to the tomb looking for a dead body and found a risen Lord.

What have you found today? Has *church* become personal for you? Jesus calls your name today on Easter Sunday, but also on every other Sunday of the year. The reason that first century Christians moved their worship from Saturday to Sunday is because Jesus rose from the dead on Sunday. *Every* Sunday, we celebrate the resurrection; *every* Sunday should be Easter to us.

How *personal* is Easter to you? This Easter morning, Jesus continues to call your name. Can you recognize his voice? How will you respond to Easter?