

“What’s In A Name?”
John 20:1-18; Psalm 118:14-24

It was 1976, and I was lounging in the back row, as was my custom. It was a large class, especially by seminary standards, probably 100 to 125 students. We were all there because of the teacher, although from the first day onward, I had found a second, and increasingly compelling reason for attending when I discovered that smart and beautiful Jean Diener was also in attendance. At the time, only I could fathom that she would one day lower her standards enough to become Jean Diener Weaver.

Yet, she, like all the men surrounding her, had come to sit at the feet of Dr. Bruce Manning Metzger. If you were to open up the pew Bibles there in front of you and turn to the preface, you will discover that Dr. Metzger was chairman of the committee that produced the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. We sometimes joked that was just a wee step down from God Himself signing it.

To list Dr. Metzger’s books, articles, professional associations, and honorary degrees would take far more time than a sermon, or a worship service. I have no clue how many languages he spoke or could read. In the first pages of his autobiography, describing his education, he quickly mentions studying Latin, Greek, German, French, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Syriac. There undoubtedly were several more.

Professor Ben Witherington III tells of sitting in Dr. Metzger’s class during the summer of 1976 when a man ran into the room interrupting the lecture. “Dr. Metzger,” the man excitedly announced, “I have here the earliest copy of the Gospel of Mark in Syriac.” Dr. Metzger smiled and in his typical humble manner asked politely: “Do you mind if I have a look?” Beaming, the man handed the manuscript to one of, if not the world’s preeminent scholars on early Christian writings. Less than a minute later, Dr. Metzger handed the manuscript back and said, “Well, it’s very interesting, but a Syriac copy of Mark, it is not. It is a 6th century manuscript in Boharic and of no particular notoriety.”

Now, some of you many know that Boharic is a dialect of the Egyptian Coptic language, but I had to look it up. Yet, no one doubted that Bruce Metzger knew what it was, and could read it.

Which brings me to a cold, New Jersey, spring day thirty four years ago. I was walking across campus when I saw Dr. Metzger on the same sidewalk on his way to the library. Realizing he would not know me out of a lecture class of over one hundred students, I still thought I should be polite and speak to him. “Good morning, Dr. Metzger,” I said as he approached. Pausing, with his trademark smile, he replied, “Lud, how are you?”

To this day, I have not a clue how or why Dr. Metzger knew my name. There was nothing special about me. I was not his best student. I was not one of those students who went up front after every lecture trying to suck up to the teacher. I could do absolutely nothing for him. There was no advantage for him

to learn my name. And, I have no illusions that three or four months after this class ended, Dr. Metzger would still know my name. But on that day, the world's preeminent biblical scholar spoke my name, telling me he knew who I was. And to this day, I don't recall anything Dr. Metzger said in class, but I still remember the day and the feeling it created when he called me by name.

In our scripture, Jesus calling Mary by name is the turning point in our passage. By saying the name "Mary," Jesus confirms who he is and Mary's value to him.

Our passage begins on the Sunday after Jesus' Friday crucifixion. Mary Magdalene has likely come to the tomb to mitigate the odor of decay by anointing Jesus' body with spices. Religious law would have forbidden her to perform this task the day before on Saturday, the Jewish Sabbath. So she arrives first thing on Sunday morning, the Greek word of the original text informing us it was sometime between 3 – 6 a.m.

Jesus has been placed in a garden tomb, likely hewn out of the rock on a hillside, and then closed with a huge round stone that would slide into a groove in front of the entrance. But when Mary arrives, she discovers that the stone has been moved, enabling the tomb to be entered. Thinking someone has stolen Jesus' body, she rushes back to town and informs Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, likely the Apostle John. These two race to the tomb, where Peter enters first and sees the discarded burial clothes. The other disciple also enters, but upon witnessing the scene, the scripture tells us, "he saw and believed."

But then, both of them return to their homes, leaving Mary alone in the garden. Weeping, she looks into the tomb, and discovers two angels dressed in white, where the body of Jesus had been lying. "Woman, why are you weeping?" they ask.

"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turns around from the tomb and sees Jesus standing there, but does not know it is Jesus.

Jesus says to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Thinking he is the gardener, Mary says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

"Mary," Jesus says to her.

"Teacher," she joyfully replies.

Jesus instructs Mary to go and tell his disciples he is ascending to God. And Mary becomes the first proclaimer of the gospel when she returns to the city and tells the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

John, an avid golfer, came in from the course one Saturday. His wife, Mary, asked him with whom he had played that day. He said, "Oh, no one in particular." She asked, "Why don't you play with Bill anymore?" John replied, "Do you want to play golf with someone who throws his clubs, swears all the time, lies about his scores, moves his ball in the rough and won't stop talking

while you're trying to play a shot?" "Of course not!" said Mary. John said, "Well, neither does Bill."

It is likely no one on that first Easter wanted much to do with Mary Magdalene. When she told the disciples she had seen the Lord, it must have sounded like she was moving her ball in the rough and cheating on her score.

"Jesus said to Mary, 'Whom are you looking for?'"

When you think about it, this sounds like a silly question. It is between three and six a.m. in the morning, and Mary Magdalene is standing in front of Jesus' tomb. He is the one who was tortured, crucified, and buried in that tomb. She is his disciple, seemingly devoted disciple since she has crawled out of bed in the middle of the night so she could administer spices to his body at the earliest possible time. She has made this extraordinary effort to help someone who is dead and gone, the very person who is proposing this question, and yet he still asks Mary, "Whom are you looking for?"

When you consider it, the question carries a similarity with us gathering here this morning. Like Mary, we claim to be his disciples. We may not have brought spices to anoint his body, but we are dressed in our spring finery. We have gathered here in his symbolic house, his resting place. "Whom are you looking for?" is a question that is just as silly to ask us as it was Mary.

Yet, the parallels between Mary Magdalene that first Easter and us on this Easter are striking because this question resonates so strongly for Mary and you and me. Jesus didn't ask Mary what she was looking for but whom she was looking for. Because it was the whom that would transform her life, fill her with new meaning and purpose, produce Easter in her heart and in the world.

Most of us spend our time, energy, and resources looking for the what of life — money, prestige, the right school, security, a good job, happiness. Not bad, but not life changing. Jesus' question provided Mary, and you and me, with a window into heaven. It is not about what, but whom. Only Jesus brings Easter in our hearts, our minds, our relationships, our faith. This morning, have you and I come seeking what or whom?

At a conference in Rome this past February, Jean and I heard Timothy Radcliffe speak. Radcliffe is a well known author and the head of the Dominicans, a Roman Catholic brotherhood. Not too long ago, Radcliffe travelled to the African nation of Burundi, where a savage civil war was being waged between the Hutu and Tutsi tribes. The horrific atrocities of rape, murder, and genocide were being carried out on both sides. Most of the population had fled into military or refugee camps.

Radcliffe visited a Bishop's compound, a walled enclosure to which both Hutus and Tutsis had escaped for safety. Immediately recognizing the potential volatility of this situation, Radcliffe noted that everyone seemed to be fine living together. When Radcliffe asked the Bishop what rules he had instituted so that these two warring tribes could co-exist in this small, confined area, the Bishop

replied: “There is only one requirement to be here. Everyone must take communion together every morning.”

Jesus, the whom of our lives, heals us and brings meaning and purpose and direction to our hearts and minds.

“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.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Mary.’”

There is much academic speculation as to why Mary did not recognize Jesus. Regardless of what Dan Brown may try to convince you in The DaVinci Code, all we really know about Mary Magdalene was that she received the name Magdalene because she likely came from Magdala, a city on the west shore of the Sea of Galilee. Scripture tells us Jesus cast seven demons out of her and she became a devoted disciple. But, legends about her being a prostitute or a person of loose morals are later myths harboring no historical legitimacy.

What we do know is that during Jesus’ last days, she is more frequently named than any other women. She stood at the foot of the cross. She tarried at the tomb after Jesus’ burial. She went with the women to buy spices to anoint Jesus’ body. She discovers the empty tomb on Sunday morning.

So, how did she not recognize Jesus? How did she mistake him for the gardener? Scholars speculate that Mary was not looking directly at Jesus, or it was too dark to see clearly, or she couldn’t recognize him through her tears, or somehow Jesus’ body was changed.

Yet, all of this misses the point. It doesn’t matter that Mary doesn’t recognize Jesus. What is important is that Jesus recognizes Mary.

“Mary.” With one word Jesus makes their relationship personal and distinctive. With one word, he confirms his promise that his followers would see him again, that their grief would turn to joy, that he would not leave them orphaned. When Jesus says, “Mary,” he touches the most intimate and faraway places of Mary’s heart and soul, confirming his relationship with her.

Each one of us wants to be known by God, believe that God has a personal interest in us, that God knows our names. We want God to love us, care about us, be concerned with our hopes and dreams, emotions and needs. And when Jesus speaks Mary’s name, he is also speaking ours.

Easter is the confirmation that our God recognizes us, loves us, and cares about us. Easter reminds us that the muck and mud of everyday living may cause us to struggle to recognize Jesus. But Jesus always knows us. Surveying a world filled with suffering, hatred, and death, Easter shouts that the last words spoken will be love, justice, and life. And we see that confirmation in our lives, because Easter promises Jesus knows our name.

I have noticed that as I have gotten older, my memory does not seem quite as sharp. If I don’t leave my keys or glasses in the same place every time, I can spend the afternoon looking for them.

It reminds me of the story of two elderly people living in Ft. Myers, he was a widower and she a widow, who had known each other for a number of years. One evening there was a community supper in the clubhouse. The two were at the same table, across from one another. As the meal went on, he took a few admiring glances at her and finally gathered the courage to ask her, "Will you marry me?" After about six seconds of "careful consideration," she answered, "Yes. Yes, I will!" The meal ended and, with a few more pleasant exchanges, they went to their respective apartments.

But next morning, he was troubled. Did she say "yes" or did she say "no"? He couldn't remember. Try as he might, he just could not recall. Not even a faint memory. With trepidation, he went to the telephone and called her.

First, he explained that he didn't remember as well as he used to. Then he reviewed the lovely evening past. As he gained a little more courage, he inquired, "When I asked if you would marry me, did you say 'Yes' or did you say 'No'?"

He was delighted to hear her say, "Why, I said, 'Yes, yes I will' and I meant it with all my heart." Then she continued, "And I am so glad that you called, because I couldn't remember who had asked me."

Age, heartbreak, disease, and eventually death all take their toll on our hearts, minds, and bodies, creating disability and a lack of recognition both of people and things we used to do. But one element we know for certain, no matter how we change, in body, mind, or soul, Jesus still recognizes us. He still calls our name and invites us to be with him, in this life and in the world to come.

"What's In A Name?"

A great deal when spoken by Jesus. When Jesus calls Mary by name, it confirms to us that God knows each one of us, that God cares about you, that you are not alone. Easter announces the defeat of sin and death, but also declares that defeat is not only cosmic, but personal, speaking to each of our hearts and minds.

This morning, you and I stand by the tomb. The traumas and troubles of our lives cause every one of us to struggle to recognize Jesus. But today, he calls your name, just as he did Mary's. We believe this, we proclaim this, with the ancient proclamation recited by Christians for almost 2000 years: He is risen. He is risen indeed!

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