

Sermon Preached by The Reverend Jonathon W. Jensen, Rector
Calvary Episcopal Church, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Easter Day, Year C
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John 20:1-18

All of us have a story that guides our lives, a story we live by. We have one as individuals, as families, a country, and even as a church. The story is rarely articulated in full. We normally hear bits and pieces but it is not too difficult to work out the whole when we take time to reflect.

What do you tell yourself when you are under stress? I can do it! I *always* mess this up. What did family and friends, coaches and colleagues, or teachers say about you that influences who you are and what you think about yourself? Family reunions, Thanksgiving dinners, or late night talks can reveal a great deal. What makes you, you? That guy can never catch a break. So and so always seems to land on her feet. Uncle Bob never could keep a job and the drinking didn't help. Aunt Diane always had good grades and succeeded at everything she tried. Everything she touched turned to gold. *Our* family never does that! Our family or our church or I have *always* been – *fill in the blank*.

What difference does it make? Over time, the stories told about us, or the ones we tell ourselves, can become reality, sometimes with fateful consequences. If you are told, often enough, that you are dumb, ugly, no good, or you can't do something – you can start to believe it. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you are told, often enough, that you are good, pretty, smart, talented, a winner, or I believe in you – you can start to believe it. That also can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Our identity is formed by these perceptions until they become our reality. Which ones, what stories, win out in your life?

The Christian lives in the world and is affected by these very worldly attitudes; it's part of what makes us human. We also have a higher calling, a higher claim on our identity. One that is based not on a self-fulfilling prophecy, good or bad, but on a *promise* of a sure and certain hope of resurrection to eternal life. A promise that death does not have the last word. In *this* world death, in all its forms, *can* win until we recognize resurrection right in front of us.

On the very first Easter, Mary Magdalen went to the tomb of Jesus. Presumably, she went there to anoint Jesus' body as was their custom – like putting flowers on a grave. Her biggest concern was how to roll away the giant stone sealing the tomb, a small cave dug from rock. When she arrived, she saw it was empty and believed that someone had taken away the body. She couldn't yet believe in resurrection or new life. Everything she had hoped and dreamed about the world and about herself had ended in his death. There was no future – only a past. So she returned to the other disciples to tell them that someone had taken the body.

Peter and John raced back to the site, went in, saw the burial wrappings on the floor but no body, and returned to their homes. They saw death but could not imagine life. Mary stood there weeping outside the tomb. She was heartbroken. She needed to check one more time to make sure it was real.

She turned from the tomb and saw Jesus standing there but did not recognize him. He said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Jesus was standing right in front of her, and she mistook him for the gardener. And then, he called her by name, "Mary!" In that moment, she recognized the risen Lord.

Mary is a symbol, a stand-in for all of us. Why didn't Mary recognize Jesus standing in front of her? She spent almost three years with him. Simply put, she did not recognize resurrection because she wasn't looking for it – she expected something else. She kept focusing on what was *inside* rather than *beyond* the tomb. If we look for death or what is wrong, that is *precisely* what we will *always* find. If we look for hope and resurrection, God will always find *us*.

Second, Mary did not recognize the resurrected Jesus because he does not look exactly like he did before. New life doesn't necessarily look like the old. Just because it doesn't look the same doesn't mean it isn't resurrection. It does not make it any less true or real for Jesus or us. Mary recognized Jesus when he called her by name. It was a recognition- not of a physical body like it was before – but a recognition of a relationship that endures through time and even death.

Third, resurrection, and our recognition of it, can take time. It took *three days* for Jesus to be raised to new life. New life can't be rushed. Grief, loss, and old stories dissipate slowly. It is only when we reflect on our own experience of death over time in the context of resurrection that it can begin to make sense. A new story, a new identity has to replace the old.

Easter is the proclamation and promise that death, in all its forms, does not have the last word. Mary, and each of us, is offered the same invitation to a new, resurrected life in Christ. Easter is a redeemed story to live by, a reclaimed identity, a renewed hope.

Resurrection happened for Jesus because God accepted, believed in, and loved him. Resurrection happened for Mary the moment Jesus called her by name when she looked beyond the tomb. It was in the personal recognition in that intimate moment that Mary knew Jesus accepted and believed in her. Mary was the one loved by God for who she was. That's the greatest truth Mary would ever know.

The Easter proclamation is the greatest truth we can ever know, our new identity and story to live by. Jesus calls each of us by name and says, "You are the one loved by God for who you are." The Easter story, the Christian life, is not so much accepting and believing in God as recognizing that God accepts and believes in us.