

Scripture

John 20:1-18

Meditation

God calls us by our name

Pastor Riva Tabelisma

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

The story of Easter Sunday is nothing new to folks who have been going to church. We hear the narrative in different versions and interpretations year after year. The characters and major components are the same. All four gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John agreed that it happened after the Sabbath or the first day of the week. If we are to look at the Jewish tradition that is common among the authors of the gospels, it will come to mind that when the creation of everything was finished, God took a Sabbath – to rest from the work that God has done. God must have been exhausted to need the Sabbath. There is no argument what day that was. When I think about this piece of the Easter narrative, I realize its significance for a new beginning for various things. Jesus completed the so-called ‘circle of life’, and Easter is the signal that a new circle will begin in the life of the people that he left behind. This is synonymous to the human experience when we lose a love one. We are closing the chapter of the story of a person and we will embark on a new chapter, this time without our dearly departed.

Today, I would like to invite you to reflect on different perspectives, not necessarily new, but different, that we can draw from a familiar story. Imagine yourself with a book or movie that you really love...and every time that you read or see the movie again, it offers a different perspective. This is what I will attempt to do this morning...just let me know whether I will be successful or not. I will also focus on Mary Magdalene, a character in the New Testament who had a very colorful reputation. She has been labelled and profiled by the early Christian church, but there are more compelling parts in her life. As a woman, she struggled a great deal in a society that sees women as second class. There are New Testament scholars and historians who suggested that Jesus and Mary Magdalene might have had an intimate relationship, but there was a documentary shown in the History Channel in January that refuted this. In this documentary, professors of different mainline denomination’s seminaries shared their interpretations of Mary Magdalene’s pivotal role in Christianity. It was mentioned in this documentary that Mary’s life was changed when Jesus rebuked the unclean spirits that possessed her and made her life miserable. She became an unnamed disciple after this life-changing experience. It is also with Jesus that Mary Magdalene felt that she is part of a circle, a fully inclusive circle. I think, Mary felt that finally, she no longer has to fight for her voice to be heard, she is now a person of true worth. She can now feel and embrace her belovedness. Because of this, I understood why Jesus was Mary’s lifeline.

As I read verse 11, I feel Mary Magdalene’s pain as she weeps outside of the tomb. She was weeping because the reality that Jesus is gone is finally sinking in. If you all will notice, there was no mention about her feelings when she ran to Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple – which is probably John. If I put myself in Mary’s situation, I will weep, too, because this is the realization that, now that Jesus, my lifeline, is gone, things will never be the same. Mary probably felt that half of her life is dead with Jesus. Things will be so much different knowing the person whom she has spent time with will be gone. This is painful. We also feel this when we lose someone that we love. According to a linguistic website, there is a difference between weeping and crying. Weeping is a result of deep grief and sadness, while crying is a burst of emotion. Weeping comes with more intensity of emotion and it is considered more personal than crying. I guess this is a very appropriate reaction for Mary Magdalene, because she lost someone who is very dear to her heart.

Her grief probably clouded her in verses 14-15 which was why she did not recognize Jesus and even 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him away'. As a faithful disciple, she wanted to do a painful but inevitable task of giving Jesus the final respect. She wanted to reclaim Jesus' honor after the crucifixion – the disgraceful form of death that a person can experience. This was not an easy task for Mary, physically and emotionally. But in a way, Mary was looking forward to performing this task, because she knew that she was called to bring back the honor that was robbed from Jesus, someone that showed her the true meaning of her belovedness. But in verse 16, we see the turning point, when Jesus mentioned Mary's reaction. She recognized the familiar voice that called her name many times. At an instant, she recognized the person in front of her. Her initial reaction was probably to hug Jesus, something that she did many times...and we know from the passage that Jesus stopped her from touching her. Because of this encounter, New Testament scholars claimed that Mary Magdalene is actually the first apostle as she is the first person to see the resurrected Jesus. Isn't this the essence of Christianity? Believing in the resurrected Christ? Unfortunately, this was downplayed by the early church because of one reason – that Mary Magdalene is a woman. Sadly, the church is one part of the society that practiced sexism.

More than that, it brings me to the reflection how Jesus embodied his preference to those who are living at the margins. Why do I say this? Where was Jesus when Simon Peter and the Beloved Disciple came to see him at his tomb? Verses 3-7 narrated how the two male disciples tried to outrun each other, but they did not find Jesus there. What they found was the shrouds of linens that wrapped Jesus. Sure, John, which is assumed as the beloved disciple as mentioned in verse 2 believed that resurrection happened. But the fact still remains that they were not the first ones to see the resurrected Jesus, which means they were not the first apostles, but Mary Magdalene. Someone who is considered insignificant of the society, someone who, because of her experiences in life have forgotten her belovedness except when Jesus made her feel significant.

I find verse 16 as very important in the whole passage because it narrated the intimate relationship of the teacher and the disciple. This is synonymous when our love one calls out our name. We know the emotions attached to that call. Remember when a parent calls you with your full name – including your middle name? Well, in my case, when I hear my middle name mentioned in one breath, I know that I am in trouble. But in this scene, Mary knew that the voice that called is the voice that made her whole. When I think about this part of the passage I think about Jesus calling me in times that my thinking is clouded by a lot of negative things – stress, deadlines, problems, illnesses of me or people who are dear to me, injustices in the society and now the pandemic and its effects in general. I will confess that there are times that I will forget my belovedness. I tend to forget that I have an intimate relationship with Jesus in times that circumstances overwhelm me. This part of the passage takes me back to the time when Jesus called my name to be his disciple and to try my best to be the teacher that Jesus called me to be. And in that call, for me to remember to embody the love that Jesus commanded, to show the love to the world.

We are doing communion today. In Maundy Thursday, we virtually shared the meal that Jesus shared with his disciples in last hours of his earthly life. In this table, everyone is invited, much like Jesus' meal with his friends. Judas, undesirable that he has become has a place at the table. As we remember Easter, let us remember Mary Magdalene's pivotal role in our own faith journey. Like Mary, in the midst of confusion that clouds our judgement, in times that we are overwhelmed by what is happening around us, let us quiet our hearts and mind. In the silence, let us listen God's call. Let us listen to that call to embody the teachings of Jesus, so that the world will know that we are his disciples. We are all beloved children of God, and we are called by our own names. This is how we know who we are and whose we are. May it be so. Amen.