### “Say to Them” Steve Finlan for The First Church, Easter, Apr. 17, 2022

**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 towards 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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 15Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” 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 [my] 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.

Joy to you all on Easter Sunday. We know our Lord, Jesus, has risen, and we rejoice for that Sunday, long ago, when he triumphed over death. This was still an astounding and new revelation seventy years later, when John wrote his account. He sets us alongside Mary as she encounters the risen Jesus.

John’s account differs from the other gospels’. The other three gospels have a group of women go to the tomb. The names of the women differ somewhat, but in all the gospels, the first woman named is Mary Magdalene (Matt 28:1; Mark 16:1; Luke 24:10). In the other three gospels, the women encounter an angel or angels, who tell them that Jesus is not here; he has risen, as he said he would. Then Jesus meets them and speaks to them briefly. In John, however, Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus alone, and before anyone else. Rather than being a variation of the story in the other gospels, it seems to be a different incident from the meeting with the group of women; it is simply not recorded in the other gospels.

Here, Mary leads Peter and John to the tomb. John goes into the empty tomb first, and he “saw and believed” (20:8), an important point for this gospel that was probably written by a disciple of John’s. He wants to establish that John was the first to believe in the resurrection. But he has to go with his data; he has to tell the story of Mary’s encounter, after the men had returned to where they were staying.

Mary sees the two angels, but she seems not to realize that they are angels, as she does not react as though they are angels. She also does not recognize Jesus when he appears and speaks to her. It is only when he says her name that she recognizes him. This implies that his resurrection form is different from what his material form had been. This may also be why he says “Do not hold on to me” (20:17).

What is it that makes us recognize someone? We usually think that it is primarily through sight, through recognition of facial and other details. But it is not just the face; it is also the demeanor, the gait, the tilt of the head, and so on. And the voice plays a role. But Mary *did* hear his voice yet did not recognize him until he said her name. So it’s not just the voice in general, but the intonation of particular words. Remember when Jesus appeared to the two believers on the road to Emmaus, and they only recognized him when he blessed bread and broke it. There was something in that gesture that they recognized.

Once Mary recognizes him, they can have a conversation. He tells her to go to the apostles and “say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’” (20:17). This is the essential message. There are really four components to the message she carries: first that she is to communicate her experience to the apostles. Second, that he has risen from the dead. Third, that he will be ascending to his father. And fourth, that his Father is also *their* Father, and his God is their God. That God is *our* Father, and not just Jesus’ father, is an essential part of the gospel message. In fact, it’s the only theological message that Jesus delivers in this, his first post-Resurrection appearance. The other things, the Resurrection and Ascension, are facts, but the Fatherhood of God is a theological message. God is the Father of all of us; we are all children of God.

Despite what the evangelist says about John seeing and believing, it is really Mary who becomes the first evangelist of the Resurrection. She is told to say what she has seen and heard, and what she has heard is that God is *our* Father as well as Jesus’ father. We should take this for granted. It is a natural fact, God *is* our Father, spiritually. Immediately after Mary tells the assembled apostles (20:18), Jesus then makes his first appearance to them (20:19). They first had to be evangelized by Mary, so to speak, then they could meet the risen Jesus.

I think the way that Mary has to hear him speak her name before she recognizes him tells us something about how *we* recognize Jesus. There is something special in each of us, in our personal experience of Jesus. There is something in *your* prayer and worship experience that signals to you that you are communicating with Jesus. Colossians says “your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). Christ knows your history, the times you have turned to him, the times you have turned away, the times you sought to restore the connection, the times you have asked for guidance or wisdom, the times you have prayed for loved ones. This personal experience is hidden with Christ, so to speak. It’s your walk in the garden with him.

Kahlil Gibran, who wrote *The Prophet*, also wrote *Jesus: The Son of Man*, which is a fictional rendering of people’s reactions after their encounters with Jesus. In his version of Mary’s encounter with Jesus, Jesus says to her “I alone love the unseen in you. . . All men love you for themselves. I love you for yourself,” and then he walks away (*Jesus*, 15). And Mary says, afterward, “Life spoke to death. For mind you, my friend, I was dead. I was a woman who had divorced her soul. I was living apart from this self which you now see. I belonged to all men, and to none” (p. 14). Whether or not this is an accurate guess on Gibran’s part, we do not know. But it shows a unique encounter with deeply personal meaning. Jesus changed people’s lives in his encounters with them, like Zacchaeus the tax collector, who had his self-respect restored by his encounter with Jesus. In fact, this is a major theme in Jesus’ interface with people. Probably Mary Magdalene had her self-respect restored, too. The woman with a haemorrhage was not only healed but told “take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well” (Matt 9:22). Her life was never the same after that.

You have a unique relationship with Jesus right now. And you can develop it, give it more content, as you live your life. So, walk in that garden with Jesus. None other has ever known *your* particular relationship with Jesus. Take everything to the Lord in prayer. Share your inner life with God. Share your anxieties and hopes with Jesus. Observe how your faith grows if you share your inner self with Jesus, and if you study the Bible and other books that help you grow spiritually. And recognize his voice when he speaks to your heart.

Jesus has thrown open the door of salvation and revealed the fact of life after death, giving us just a glimpse of what awaits us.

And so we celebrate this day, and we say “Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed!”