

When Easter Gets Personal

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John 20:1-18

Most of us have a day or two in our lives that will “forever live in infamy,” a day when we committed a gaffe or blunder so large, no one will ever let us live it down. One of my mine came on a recent Sunday morning when I introduced our newest member and baptismal candidate, Miss Jessica *Simpson*. The laughter that erupted from the congregation was the first hint I had misspoken. I didn’t have a clue.

Now truth be told, I’m not a Jessica Simpson fan. I couldn’t even identify the dear girl in a lineup. I just know she is one of those platinum blonds like Paris Hilton and Brittany Spears that so captivates popular culture. The fact that Jessica *Simpson* popped out of my mouth when introducing the truly lovely Jessica *Simons*--baptized this very morning--just goes to show how powerfully the media impacts our consciousness.

Naturally, I felt terrible about my mistake. Fortunately, Jessica and her family were gracious and good-humored. and I do take small comfort in the fact that no one present will ever forget the day Jessica Simons joined the church!

Names are important. To remember someone’s name is a gift. Growing up, my dear mother struggled mightily with her name, *Belva*. The name was so unusual and so often mangled, she gave her children the most mercifully simple names she could find: Susan, Bobby, and Linda. Unfortunately, along the way she and we picked up the surname *Setzer*, a name which can be and has been butchered in a multitude of ways.

It is striking that on the first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene didn’t even recognize the risen Christ until he called her by name. Twice she is addressed by the generic title “Woman,” but no recognition dawns. “Woman,” say the angels, “why are you weeping?” When Jesus shows up, he asks the very same question, “Woman, why are you weeping?”

But Mary just stares dully at two angels and the risen Christ, no less, while clinging to her dashed faith and broken heart. “They have taken my Lord,” she tells the angels, “And I don’t know where they laid him.”

Then she mistakes Jesus, radiant with Easter glory, for the gardener! "Sir, if you have moved the body, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away."

Despite all the hints of a miracle grand and glorious, Mary is yet searching for a *dead* Jesus; it doesn't even occur to her Jesus might be *alive*. Only when Jesus calls her by name, "*Mary!*"--as perhaps he called her years before when casting out her seven demons--does recognition dawn. "*Mary!*", cries Jesus, like an old friend grabbing us by the elbows at the airport, hoping the pressure of the grip will drive the recognition home. Simply and yet oh so powerfully, Jesus utters but a single word, "*Mary!*". And when Mary hears Jesus call her by name, then at last, Easter happens.

William Sloan Coffin tells of an American tourist who met a shepherd in India. Startled to learn the shepherd couldn't count, the American wondered aloud how the shepherd kept track of all his sheep. "Easy," the shepherd answered. "I know them all by name."

Jesus' encounter with Mary by the empty tomb recalls his promise back in John chapter 10. There Jesus likens himself to the good shepherd, saying, "The sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep *by name* and leads them out." We are not people-in-general to our crucified and risen Lord. No, we are unique individuals, beloved of the God who knows our name. And for us, as for Mary, there is no Easter that matters until Easter gets personal, as in the midst of our tears and pain and need, Jesus calls us by name.

In Mary's story, as in our own, there are at least two ways Easter becomes very personal. The first is when you think all is lost. As Mary stumbles to the tomb that first Easter morning, the world she knew and loved has ended. John's gospel emphasizes the depths of Mary's despair by noting it was still dark when she came to the tomb. Other gospels note the women came to the tomb "as it began to dawn" or "when the sun had risen." John alone insists it was still dark when the women began their journey because in this highly symbolically gospel, darkness represents a world without hope, a world without God.

And that is what Jesus' arrest, humiliation, and death have led Mary to believe: that God is either inept or unloving for no God worthy of the name would leave such a travesty unanswered. Maybe that's what your experience has led you to believe: that the divorce you didn't want or see coming could not have happened unless the God you once believed in was asleep at the switch. Or how could the job you worked so hard to get and so hard to keep turn into such a disaster if Jesus is more than just a sentimental memory from childhood? If Jesus really is the risen Lord, triumphant over sin and death, then how come you were so deeply wounded by people who claimed to know and love him? These are hard questions with no easy answers and the world is a dark, foreboding place, if such questions are all there is.

But Easter sounds the hope these unanswered questions, these death-dealing experiences, are *not* all there is. Easter sounds the hope that in the midst of your bewilderment and pain and tears, there is a holy, healing love, calling your name.

A few years after moving to Fuller Seminary, Professor Lewis Smedes fell into a deep depression. He wrote that his depression "made a hash of my relationship with God, and pushed me into a dark night of the soul. My experience was, from start to finish. . . . a hellish sense that God had abandoned me." Though a man of deep faith and religious calling, Dr. Smedes found himself cut off from his family, his friends, and even himself.

"I did not know where God was during this time," he later confessed. "I only 'knew' that wherever (God) was, (God) was not with me. But I was wrong. (God) was with me because he was in Doris, and Doris was with me."

"What did she do? She did nothing. Nothing but wait. And wait. And wait. God came back to me on the strength of her power to wait for me. Never before had I known the saving power of waiting."

Even people of deep devotion like Mary Magdalene and Lewis Smedes, go through trying times of upheaval and anguish. But Easter means the experiences of Good Friday and Dark Saturday, awful and terrible though they be, are not the end of the story. Easter is God's "Yes!" to Jesus, Easter is God's "Yes!" to hope, Easter is God's "Yes!" to life. Maybe not the life you had before or the life you are yet hankering after, but the new life God yearns to give in the wake of every heartbreak and disappointment. "I *am* the resurrection and the life," Jesus proclaims (John 11:25). Not "I *will be* the resurrection," in the sweet by and by, but "I *am* the resurrection and the life" *now*, "If only in the crushing darkness of your despair you will listen for me calling your name."

There's a second time and place when Easter gets personal, and that's when you face the death of a loved one. It's fine to wax philosophical about life-beyond-death, or the lack thereof, when there's nothing and no one on the line. But when it's your loved one being remembered by one of these lilies, or being put in that terrible hole in the ground we call a grave, that changes everything. That's when you'd give anything to know that while your loved one is lost to you, he or she is not lost to God, and that someday, in God's good time, you shall see them again.

Back in John chapter 10, the Good Shepherd chapter, Jesus promises that very thing: "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (v. 27-28). but of course, back in John chapter 10, those are just words--comforting and beautiful words, but still, only words.

It is not until Jesus dies our death and then rises with the life and love of God radiant within him, that we discover his promise is not just talk, but riveting, eternal truth. For in the power of Jesus' risen life, God speaks the final word over our sin and that word is *forgiven*; and God speaks the final word over our death and that word is *life*, life abundant now and life eternal, forever.

W. A. Criswell, famed pastor of Dallas' First Baptist Church, told of taking a seat on an airliner next to a prominent seminary professor. The professor, whom Dr. Criswell left unnamed, was grieving the loss of a young son. The boy came home from school with a fever. His parents thought the fever was the usual childhood variety, but it turned out to be a virulent strain of meningitis. The doctors told the parents gravely, they could not save their son.

The seminary professor father sat helpless by his son's bedside. The little boy, whose strength was waning, said to his father, "Daddy, it's getting dark isn't it?"

The father answered, "Yes, son, it is getting dark, very dark." Of course it was far darker than the boy knew.

"Daddy," said the son, "I guess it's time for me to go to sleep isn't it?"

"Yes, son, it's time for you to go to sleep."

The father helped the little boy fix his pillow just so. Then the boy relaxed into the pillow's softness and said, "Good night, daddy. I'll see you in the morning." He closed his eyes in sleep and in the darkness of the night, slipped into the nearer presence of God.

The professor telling the tale looked out the airplane window a long, long time, staring into the heavens. When he turned back, his cheeks were wet with tears. "Dr. Criswell," said the anguished father, "Sometimes I can hardly wait till morning!"

That first Easter morning when Mary was surprised by grace, is but the anticipation of an even greater Easter morn, yet to be: when Jesus will take those who trust in him by the elbows and one-by-one, call their names: "Bobby, Sally, Darrell, Sue!"

With Mary Magdalene of old, we shall cry, breathless with wonder, "Master!" Then Jesus will bury us in a bear hug of grace and God himself shall wipe all the tears from our eyes. "And there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things (will have) passed away" (Revelation 21:4).

I can't prove that is true, but I can promise you this: through faith in Jesus Christ, you can stop fearing death, which is to say, you can stop fearing life. For you will live in

the liberating assurance that come what may, God's grace is sufficient and nothing can snatch you from the master's loving, able hands (John 10:28).

Recently, a dear sister from this fellowship took gravely ill. She had lived with gusto and grace, but as her dying day drew near, she sent word by way of her daughter-in-law: "Tell that preacher and the people up there at the church not to pray for me to get well. I'm ready to go. Just pray for the Lord's will to be done." I have no doubt that when her time came, she heard Jesus calling her name.

Yes, sooner or later, Easter gets personal. When it does, listen closely. Through the din of your despair and fear, Jesus will be calling your name.

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