



Westminster Presbyterian Church

Richard Baker - April 16, 2017 Sermon

“Mary!”

Song of Solomon 3:1b-4a, 8:6-7, John 20:11-18

Not seeing Jesus—or having only a partial, incomplete perception of him, followed by startling statements and actions by Jesus that often are at first comically misunderstood, but that then sometimes lead to a deeper, believing perception of Jesus—that’s the movement, the drama, of John’s Gospel. Three examples:

“Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” That’s the first thing Nathanael says—that’s how Nathanael first reacts (Jesus is yet another dubious thing out of Nazareth)—when (in chapter 1) Philip tells him about Jesus. To which, Philip says: “Come and see.”

And when Nathanael does come and see Jesus, Jesus startles him by saying that he saw him under the fig tree before Philip even spoke to him. It’s not clear to us what this means, but it’s clear that it means a great deal to Nathanael. In fact, it means so much to him, startles him so much, that he does come to see Jesus more deeply and believe in him more deeply. He says, “Teacher, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!”

Example #2: “Teacher, we know that you have come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” That’s what Nicodemus says to Jesus—that’s how he sees Jesus (as a teacher from God)—when (in chapter 3) he first comes to see him under cover of darkness.

And then, Jesus tells Nicodemus that that he must be born again, be born from above. At first, Nicodemus misunderstands him—comically—“How am I supposed to get back into my mother’s womb?”—he fails to get the spiritual meaning of his words. But then, when Jesus says to him “the Son of Man will be lifted up, so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”—well, Jesus’ saying that begins a process of Nicodemus’ beginning to see Jesus more deeply (as not just another teacher but as the Messiah) and thus to believe more deeply.

Example #3: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” That’s what the Samaritan woman says to Jesus, that’s how she sees Jesus at first—as a Jewish man who will have nothing to do with her, when (in chapter 4) Jesus asks her for a drink of water. But when Jesus offers her living water—a spring of water gushing up to eternal life—well, at first she too comically misses the point, mistaking the spiritual for the physical (“Sir, get me a bucket!”). But then, as she and Jesus continue to talk, she comes to see him more deeply (“Sir, I see you are a prophet”) and then to see and believe in him even more deeply: “Sir, I know that the Messiah is coming” And then Jesus says to her the most startling thing, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.” And so she runs to tell her fellow townspeople, “Come and see the man—He cannot be the Messiah, can he?” Now, it’s an ongoing process—she still frames it as a question—but already she’s come to see, him and believe in him, far more deeply, and she’s inviting others to do the same.

And so it goes, on and on, throughout John’s Gospel: people not seeing Jesus—having only partial, incomplete perceptions of Jesus, followed by startling statements and actions on Jesus’ part that often are, at first, comically misunderstood, but that then sometimes lead to a deeper, believing perception of

Jesus—that's the movement, the drama, of John's Gospel.

And often the startling, misunderstood statements are Jesus' "I am" statements:

I am he—the one who is speaking to you. *I am* the bread of life. Before Abraham was, *I am*. *I am* the good shepherd; my sheep know my voice; *I am* the gate; *I am* the gatekeeper; *I am* the resurrection and the life. *I am* the way, the truth and the life. *I am* the true vine and you are the branches.

We've been focusing on both these "I am" statements in the weeks leading up to Easter. And these statements, and many others like them—along with Jesus' miracles—are the startling things that get Jesus' listeners to look at him again, and perhaps to see him more fully and thus to believe more deeply. That's the movement, the drama, of John's Gospel.

And it all comes to a head with Mary Magdalene.

What do we know—what do you need to know—about Mary Magdalene? She loved him and he's dead. That's it. She loved him; he's dead; and now his body's gone—and she's heartbroken. That's all we need to know about Mary Magdalene.

And so she stands outside his tomb, weeping. And when she sees the two angels inside his tomb, she doesn't see them as angels; she sees them only as more people—two more—who don't understand, don't get it, don't care, who *aren't* him.

"Woman, why are you weeping?" the angels ask her.

"They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

That's all she sees: his absence. He's dead, and now they've taken his body. She is in a fog of grief. His absence is her world.

And then Jesus is right there, standing right in front of her. And she's *still* in a fog; still doesn't see him. If ever there was a case of *not* seeing Jesus (and John's Gospel is strewn with them), a case of having a partial, incomplete perception of Jesus, a case of misidentifying Jesus, this is it. She thinks he's the gardener.

At first it seems hard to imagine—I mean, how can she not see him? He's standing right in front of her. Even when he speaks to her—when he asks her the same question the angels ask, "Woman, why are you weeping?"—even then she doesn't recognize him. It seems hard to imagine.

But really, if you think about it, it's not hard to imagine. The last thing she expects is to see him alive, right in front of her, speaking to her. The resurrection, the kingdom of God, and eternal life, or rather, his talking about the resurrection, the kingdom of God, and eternal life, and her believing not only in what he said but in him who said it—all that is gone now, not even a distant memory—erased by the overwhelming reality of death—his death. He was supposed to be the gate, the one to open that door, the good shepherd to bring in that kingdom-life, and to bring them into it, and now he's dead, now he's gone.

She doesn't even give him a second look, a puzzled double-take along the lines of "that couldn't be him, could it?". No, she doesn't see Jesus at all, because, to her, Jesus is dead *and* gone. And that so completely holds her, holds her mind and her heart—has so completely broken her heart—that she simply sees him as somebody else, just somebody else talking to her, just somebody else who asks why she's weeping and doesn't really care—just somebody else who doesn't know her, her grief, her world, or her world of grief. She simply sees him as just somebody else—somebody she expects to see in this kind of situation—the gardener—who, like the rest of the world, like the world itself, has taken him

away from her.

“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Jesus asks her.

“Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”

And as she’s saying this—that she’s looking for him—he’s standing right in front of her, she’s looking right at him; she’s talking to him, for goodness’ sake; if it weren’t so sad, it would be funny; really, it is kind of funny.

So how does Jesus get Mary to see him? What does he to say to her?

Now, you might expect him to dust off an “I am” statement at this point. “I am the resurrection and the life,” for example—he might have said that. No doubt that would have been dramatic, and now it would be self-evidently, undeniably true. But that’s not what he says.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life”? He could have said that, too. Again, it would have been dramatic, and again now it is self-evidently, undeniably true. But that’s not what he says.

“I am he, the one who is speaking to you”? Well, he could have said that, too; and it would have had some resonance, harkening back, as it does, to what he said to the Samaritan woman at the well. But that’s not what he says.

So what does Jesus say to her?

You know, they say that every human voice is unique. And certainly we can—we do—identify people by their voices. But sometimes we misidentify them, too. Sometimes we simply incorporate a voice into the way we perceive and expect to perceive the world. We answer the phone expecting to hear someone else’s voice, so that’s the voice we hear. And yet when it comes to the people we love and who love us . . . well, that’s different. We know their voices. And if we, occasionally, do misidentify them . . . well, maybe sometimes we do, but when they say our names, and especially when they say our names in love—now that is different. That’s how we identify and remember them. It’s why some of us keep our voicemail boxes full: we’re saving those voicemails—those last voicemails—to hear that voice just one more time, that voice saying your name just one more time, saying it, at the end of the message right before their time ran out, “I love you, . . .” just one more time. Or if it’s not voicemail, maybe we play that person’s favorite song or music, play it again and again—just one more time. So we can remember and not forget. Just so we know that, somewhere, they are still there, still here, still with us.

So what does Jesus say to her?

“Mary!”

And in response, she can say only one word, the one thing that he has always been, and always will be, to her: “Teacher.”

And then it’s all too much for her. She falls to her knees, still weeping—but tears of joy now—holding on to him for dear life—his dear life.

And by the way, don't misunderstand Jesus' saying to her, "Don't hold on to me." It's not that he's against public displays of affection; or that he's in some fragile, I've-just-been-resurrected-so-I-bruise-easily condition. No, what he's saying, what he's said all along, is that he still must ascend to the Father. But when he does so ascend, he will send the Holy Spirit, as he's also promised, so that, in his absence, Mary, all the disciples, and all the world, will continue to hear his words and see his actions, and will thus be brought into a deeper, more believing perception of Him.

Which is just to say that this process, this movement, the drama of John's Gospel, continues. It begins anew when Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples, as Jesus tells her to, and says, "I have seen the Lord." A startling statement to say the least, but it's true: she has seen the Lord: more deeply, and with correspondingly deeper belief than anyone else, ever before. And yet at first the disciples don't believe her, until that very night when Jesus startles them by suddenly appearing among them, saying, "Peace be with you," and giving them the Holy Spirit. And so they come to believe. Except for Thomas who wasn't there that night, and so the other disciples say to him, "We have seen the Lord," which of course he doubts and doesn't believe, until a week later when Jesus suddenly appears to him . . . And so it goes: so the church grows in faith and love, becoming the body of Christ in the world, even after Jesus has ascended. A process that continues down to our own day, not through appearances of the risen Jesus, but through the work of the Holy Spirit bringing his words and actions to us, to startle us, as in the Gospel of John, which was written, as the author says, so that we, as readers, might see Jesus more deeply, so that we as readers might believe in him more deeply and have life—his dear life.

The process does not begin with Mary, and it certainly doesn't end with her, but, immediately after Jesus' resurrection, it begins anew with her. That first Easter morning, Mary sees the glory of God. When Jesus says her name, and Mary turns to look again at him—to really see him for the first time—Mary sees the glory of God.

His absence is no longer her world; he is with her.

And so also with us; God is with us. God comes into our world, comes to us, in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. But God comes into our world, comes to us, not to reveal himself, as glorious as that revelation may be and no doubt is; God comes into our world, comes to us, not to proclaim his kingdom, as glorious as that proclamation and that kingdom no doubt is.

God comes into our world, comes to us, not to deliver truth to us, even truth about himself (I am the way the truth and the life), as glorious as that truth no doubt is; not even to feed us for life (I am the bread of life) as glorious as that food and that life no doubt is.

God comes into our world, and comes to us, not even to give us his name, as glorious as that name is. NO: God comes into our world, and comes to us, to call us by our names—each of us, by name—in love.

"Mary!"

There, there: the glory of God.

And Mary saw it, saw Him.

He lives.

He is risen.

May we too see Him, believe in him, and have life—his life.

Amen.