



## *Say Her Name*

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John 20:11-20 & Romans 6:3-4

**Easter Sunday: The Resurrection of the Lord**

**March 27, 2016**

### *Scripture Introduction*

Through six weeks of Lent, we have talked about THE BAPTISMAL CORD. It is as if a slender cord, so slender as to not even be seen, is tied around our waist, and we are pulled, gently and inevitably, toward Easter and resurrection, and toward who we were made to be. We have emphasized that baptism reflects the love God has for all people; God says to all:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

And today we have two texts to bind together Baptism and Easter. The first reading is John's story of the resurrection and the curious truth that Mary does not at first recognize the risen Christ. And the second reading is from Romans, wherein Paul declares that in the power of Christ's resurrection, *we* might walk in newness of life.

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*I have served congregations where there weren't as many members in the whole church as there were children up here a minute ago to exchange blessings with us.*

At the San Anselmo Church, as part of the liturgy, we sang a song to gather the children to the front of the sanctuary; the children's names were in the song. And the church was small enough that I could include the name of every child who might be there. And we really didn't want to leave a child out. We even had an usher greet new families and say, "You know, if you wanted to tell us your child's name, our pastor will sing her name when it's time to come forward." They'd hand me the names just before the song, so I could include their names too.

The children, who *knew* the ritual, when the song began, would get up and stand by the end of their pew or sit at the edge of their seat, waiting for their name to be called. "Sarah, Johnnie, Suzie, Henry..." And they'd come up right away when they heard their names. We were always concerned about a child who might be waiting at the end of a pew and did not hear her name. Even though we added a "and everyone else come too," we knew it how important it was that each could hear her name.

One of the seminary professors, who attended that church, once wrote to the staff about the significance of the naming for him. He said:

Each child is named here in the presence of God and so told that they are eternally of value, that nothing can change the fact that they are God's children. Their naming says they are real in defiance of a world that devalues them. They have substance, worth. The *naming* does that. It reaffirms the holy, eternal truth in baptism.

*Because sermons are prepared with an emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts may occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.*

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That is baptism. Throughout Lent, we've been calling it THE BAPTISMAL CORD. On Ash Wednesday, we began by reaffirming our baptismal vows. That night, we were called by name. We were reminded that we are dust *and* that we are children of God. God names us as her own children.

It is the naming we focus on today. And I want to be sure to reiterate to any who have not been officially baptized that the Isaiah text communicates the truth we're after, when God says to all:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.*<sup>1</sup>

There is no stipulation that one be baptized *in order to* be loved by God. God speaks here to the whole human family that God has created. I often tell children that baptism is our "catching up" with God. God already loves you. Baptism is the way that the church catches up with God's love. If you *have* a name, we believe God loves you. The truth in baptism is that we are all named as God's beloved.

Sadly, I'm old enough now that sometimes I forget names. It hurts. It's an odd and difficult experience: I know this person. I know him well. But until I can name him, I feel incomplete. When I finally can, it's: "Ah, Yes! George! That's who it is." The name holds us in a holy way.

Some years ago, a family I knew lost their teenage daughter, Kimberly, to cancer. Her death came in early summer. It was one of those unspeakable tragedies – she was too young, and it was hard for anyone to talk about it. At Christmas time, though, the family had finally gotten some strength back and was able to send out their Christmas card. In it they talked about how hard the year had been, and they asked their friends for one present during the coming year. They said, "Please, this year as a gift to us, please, say her name. When people don't say her name, it's as if she had never been. So say her name." The name holds us in a holy way and transcends the grave.

Again in the Isaiah text, God says, "I have called you by name. You are mine." As preacher Valerie Bridgeman Davis tells us,

Naming is powerful. What someone calls you defines you. In the ...epic television series, Alex Haley's *Roots*, a scene about naming is especially poignant. After several failed attempts to run away, the African Kunta Kinte has his foot chopped off. One would think the foot-chopping incident was the most brutal part of the scene, but no; the beating he endures is punctuated by a painful ending in which Kunta Kinte finally succumbs to the slave master's designation for him, "Toby." The glory of his heritage and the splendor of his name disappear in that moment. His name suffers a profound death. During the showing of *Roots* and for years afterwards, many people reported being irrevocably changed by this scene.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 43:1.

<sup>2</sup> Valerie Bridgeman Davis, "Homiletical Perspective on Isaiah 62:1-5," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), pp. 245-47.

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To have his name stolen, ripped from his soul, is the negation of the baptismal promise – far worse even than for the child who waits at the end of the pew and does not hear her name.

There is a great song out there on the airwaves. It's by Janelle Monáe. It's a deceptively simple song. It's a plea, a prayer, a protest, an indictment, and a call. The song shouts the names of African Americans who have been killed – Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Trayvon Martin – and the names reach back to the lynching of Emmitt Till. Each name is sung by an individual performer with ragged insistence, in rage and pain and protest – “Say his name... Trayvon Martin – say his name; Trayvon Martin – say his name; Trayvon Martin – say his name. Say his name. Say his name. Say his name. Sandra Bland – say her name; Sandra Bland – say her name; Sandra Bland – say her name. Say her name. Say her name. Say her name.”

Say her name. So she is not lost. So she is not forgotten. So that such injustice will not happen again. So the glory of her heritage and the splendor of her name will not disappear. So we will not forget. So she is not forgotten. So she is not lost. The name transcends the grave. Say her name.

I've told you in the past about the hard relationship I had with my father. His name is Konrad Howard Stokes. When he was alive, our relationship was soaked in anger and fear. For years, I was stuck, buried in that hard place. I lived with a depression that can still sometimes sneak up and pull me back into the tomb.

For a long time my father was *enormous* in my life. He filled every room I went into, even thousands of miles away. He filled up every authority figure I ever met. He was so big that, sometimes when I looked at my *wife*, I saw him. I thought she was doing what he had done. And lots and lots of other people too. He was *gi-normous*. Then, by grace, I got a little distance, perspective – through therapists and friends, he shrank. Wow, did he shrink! – at times, he was about this big: tiny. I could flick him away. And I loved doing it: empowering. Freeing. Liberating. But at some point in the process with my dad, from huge to tiny and back again, he finally became about five feet eleven, which was his height, and I could kind of see *him*.

But, more importantly, and this was a huge gift, I began to see him perfected, healed in the presence of God. I saw my dad transformed by the power I believed was in God. I saw Konrad Howard Stokes, at the end of his pew, named and sanctified in the presence of God.

I hope you know the film *Field of Dreams*. After Ray Kinsella hears voices out in his cornfield say, “Build it and he will come” and “Ease his pain,” resurrection comes in that movie, when at the denouement Ray does a double-take and sees the father he was long alienated from walking toward him. Ray sees his father “with his whole life in front of him,” and Ray says, “I'm not even a glint in his eye.” Ray recognizes him and *delights* in his father for the first time in forever.

My father, perfected in the love of God, is not as I experienced him, nor as he often was in this life. He was a man, an imperfect soul, broken down, like Ray Kinsella's dad, by age or by his father's cruelty – but then I saw him with his whole life in front him, when I wasn't even a glint in his eye. I saw him beautiful, walking into the presence of God, as he was made to be. When I talk to him now,

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that's how I see him, anew: patient, gentle, and caring, full of risen wisdom and kindness and generous love.

I wonder if, when I truly see him next, I'll need a double-take? Will I recognize him perfected in the resurrection love? Will I recognize him at first take?

It's curious about Mary here in John's Gospel. She's gone to the tomb. She is weeping, distraught, despairing; she blurts out to the angels, "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have put him."

She turns around and, John says, she is looking Jesus right in the face. She even hears his voice. *She saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. 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."*

She's talking with him and doesn't recognize him. How can she look right at him and see him but not know him?

Some wrong-headed commentators, wanting resurrection to be a kind of empirical experience, say, "Well, it was dark." What? If it's so dark she can't see who Jesus is, how does she see the two angels in the tomb? It's darker in there. No. That's not how John understood it. This recognition depends on the viewer. Empirical knowledge indicates that anyone under the same circumstances would experience the same thing. John is intentionally saying something very different. Something changes in *Mary*, and then she sees.

Mind you, this is no different from Matthew, who says that the disciples saw Jesus, and yet doubted, or Luke, who tells us the disciples walked and talked with Jesus on the road and didn't recognize him. The gospels agree that resurrection is real, but it is not empirical. To truly see this sometimes requires a double-take. So I imagine, like Ray Kinsella, I may need a double-take, a change in me, to recognize my own father.

We'll return to the text before we're done, but first back to the *name*.

Kimberly's parents, Alex Haley, Janelle Monáe – they all know to tell us: *Say her name*. The name transcends the grave. It's how we remember people, how we restore their heritage and the splendor of their souls. We keep those names on their gravestones, in the columbarium, in our hearts, and on our lips, especially.

I want to invite you to do something. My wife Karen's step-father, Dale, once participated in a march for the Sanctuary Movement, part of his work for Central American refugees. At the beginning of the march, everyone was handed a small cross with a name to carry along the way – Dale too.

The march culminated at St. Mary's Cathedral in San Francisco. When he arrived, Dale noticed people lying down on the chancel holding crosses with names on them, including the names of Archbishop Romero, the names of the disappeared, and other martyrs. At points in the service, one of those lying down in the chancel would stand up and say the name on their cross. Then everyone

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in the congregation would respond, "*Presenté*"—"Present," affirming that this person was present in the power of the resurrection. Others throughout the sanctuary stood and said a name. And everyone responded, "Present." Dale realized that the name on the cross he held was one such person. He began to feel, if he didn't say the name, that person wouldn't be there. So he stood and said his name: Justo Maria Gonzales. And everyone said, "Present!"

Say her name. Say his name. I invite you to that practice now. We've done this before on All Saints Sunday, and I invite you again. Today, I invite you to name someone whom you would like to see *perfected now* in the love of God. Perfected in the power of the resurrection.

Let me begin with one of the name of those for whom the lilies are given, whom some of you have lost so recently. And Sandra Bland. Trayvon Martin. Emmitt Till. Konrad Howard Stokes. The name... the name endures beyond the grave. Say his name. Say her name. Say it. I'll repeat it, and we will declare them present.

Mary does not recognize Jesus, *until* he says, "Mary." Until he names her. And *then* she sees him. She does her double-take and recognizes him.

Jesus said to her, "Mary!" Standing at the end of her pew, she hears her name, and something changes in *her*.

Did you notice? It's not Mary who says the name of Jesus. As important, and beautiful, and blessed as it is for us to name those beyond the grave in resurrection light—in today's story, Jesus names *Mary*. He names the *living*. Jesus says, "Mary, I am raised, but, Mary, it's about you, who are alive."

In that same resurrection scene in *Field of Dreams*, when Ray sees his father walking toward him, and says, "I'm not even a glint in his eye...," and the young catcher who will be his father approaches, Ray says, "[Oh...] Build it and *he* will come. Ease *his* pain." He sees his father and says, "It was *you*."

But the ghost, the angel, Shoeless Joe, says, "No, Ray, it was *you*." Ease his pain.

No, Mary, it's you. Ease her pain.

When Jesus died, part of Mary, a whole lot of Mary went down into the tomb with him. It's always like that, isn't it? A piece of us dies when we lose our loved one. Mary's in the graveyard in too many ways. She's among the tombs—in her deadness, her grief, her deathlike depression. Then he says *her* name. *She* is named, the living. And newness of life, resurrection, is hers.

Through therapists and prayer, and friends and grace, and through this story of Mary, I see my father healed, but I hear Shoeless Joe..., I hear Jesus saying, "No, Chandler, it's you." At my best, in my best resurrection hope, I see my dad, as I hope you see those you love, perfected in the presence of God. I see Konrad Howard Stokes, whole. And when I see my *father* as healed, *I* too am changed, made new. Resurrection liberates everyone around us..., and us.

This is the truth in *baptism*—newness of life. Baptism is the promise of resurrection now: *I have* called you by name. You *are* mine. Now. Resurrection is for you, the living. You are *named* as who you were made to be in the full heritage and splendor of your name—where the baptismal cord is

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pulling you, sometimes in defiance of the turbulent waters: the whole, healed, uplifted one that you are in God's love.

This is the truth in baptism: Resurrection life is for you now. *Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death,... so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead..., so we too might walk in newness of life.*<sup>3</sup>

Jesus says, "Mary." He names *her*, and *she* comes to life. Resurrection hope isn't only for those presumed dead, but for the living. He is ascended, but *this* is the world that needs justice for former slaves, for the disappeared, for the abused. *This* is the world that needs our risen wisdom, kindness, and generous love.

As you now sit in your pew, or stand at the end of the pew, as it were, waiting, waiting to hear your name, along with Trayvon and Sandra, Emmitt, Kimberly, and Konrad – I tell you, he calls *your* name!

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.*

Thanks be to God. Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! So are you. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>3</sup> Romans 6:3-4.