

CALLED BY NAME
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

That first Easter morning, in the twilight of dawn, Mary Magdalene stood before a tomb where she had come to mourn. Like so many who have been numbed by the death of one they love, she sought comfort in performing the rituals her society prescribed for those who have buried their dead. The other gospels tell us she had come to anoint Jesus' body that had been laid to rest in haste before the Sabbath began on Friday evening. Nowadays we call it settling the estate or cleaning out the closets, but every age has found ways for those who are left behind to do something to deal with their grief, tasks that help ease the pain and begin to adjust to life without the one who gave purpose and meaning.

What a picture of how overwhelming grief is. When Mary looked into the tomb, she saw two angels sitting where Jesus' body had lain. "Woman," they asked her, "why are you weeping?" But those messengers from heaven did nothing for her. "Woman," they called her. She didn't need an impersonal revelation, even from angels. She needed the one who knew her, the one who understood her better than she understood herself, the one to whom she was not just "woman" but Mary, Mary of Magdala, Mary whose heart and soul longed for Jesus.

Then she saw the man standing there. He was not dressed in white like an angel from heaven. There was nothing celestial about his appearance. She thought he was the gardener, come early on the first day of the week to tend to his springtime chores. And then he said her name – "Mary." That's when she recognized him. The Lord said her name, and she believed.

What is it about a name? A name is the first gift we give a child. It's the first thing we share about ourselves when we meet someone new. Our names carry with them our identity, our history, our heritage.

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Things aren't complete until they have a name. The first task God gave Adam was naming the animals. Giving names was part of the work of creation. When God spoke to Moses in the burning bush, God revealed the divine name. Before that the Hebrews knew God only as an impersonal force shrouded in mystery. But when God led God's people out of slavery, God established an intimate relationship with them, and you can't have a relationship unless you know someone's name. God spoke the name – YHWH, which means, "I am who I am."

Names have power. Just think of the power your name carries for you. When I was in the tenth grade, I tried out for the high school basketball team. I worked all summer and into the fall running, jumping rope, lifting weights, trying to master free throws and the lay ups. When it came time for tryouts, I made the first two cuts. Finally the day came when the coach posted the list of those who made the team. After school I crowded around the bulletin board in the locker room with the other boys, anxiously scanning the list for my name. I didn't see it. I studied it a second time, and a third. I was devastated. My name wasn't there.

Not many of us have heard Jesus call our names the way he called Mary that morning in the garden. But many of us have heard him calling to us in the depths of our hearts, calling us to a different way of life, calling us from the things that limit us and hold us back from the life he sets before us. With all the other things calling to us, with all our other commitments and temptations, sometimes it's hard to recognize the voice of Jesus calling our name above all the other noise that clamors for our attention.

Sometimes it's in our very longing that he is calling us. Sometimes Jesus calls to us by stirring up in us dissatisfaction with things the way they are. He draws us to him by making us long for something we're not sure how to name.

CALLED BY NAME
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A few years ago *The Wall Street Journal* did a profile of Marykay Powell. She stopped going to church when she left home in the 1960s. She got a job in the movie industry, and faith and matters of the spirit didn't seem relevant. She made it to the top in Hollywood. She produced movies like *Barbarians at the Gate* and *Harriet the Spy*, and *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*. On weekends she would be in a private jet headed for resorts in Mexico or Arizona. But along the way, unease set in, something she couldn't put her finger on. Then it hit her. "I'm separated from God," she realized. It was like a faint call. She tried a number of different paths to fill her emptiness. She went to New Age lectures. She studied the Dalai Lama. She took courses in Buddhism at UCLA. Then a religion professor convinced her to join a Bible study he was teaching at a local church. That was the beginning of her return to Christ. She didn't hear Jesus speak her name like he spoke the name of Mary on Easter. But she felt he knew her, and it was like being recognized by an old friend. "I'm going to sound nuts," she said, but it wasn't until she asked God to forgive her for being away that she was comfortable going back to church again. "I had to say, 'Please take me back. Please help me.'"¹

Maybe Jesus has brought you to this place this morning because he has been calling you all along, and you just need to hear him say your name, you need to hear him calling you home.

Some people think that Jesus would never call their name. They don't fit the mold of what they think people Jesus calls are supposed to be like. Some think that because they haven't called on the name of Jesus in years he has forgotten their name. Some think because they're no longer married to the one whose name they share, Jesus isn't interested in calling their name. Some think that because they don't have

¹ Lisa Miller, "Can You Go Back?" *The Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 1998, p. W1.

CALLED BY NAME

Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

all the answers to their questions about God or because they don't know the Bible very well or because they have questions about faith, then Jesus wouldn't call their name. Some haven't lived the kind of life they're proud for Jesus to see, and they think Jesus would never call the name of someone who has done some of the things they have done.

A few years ago I attended the Midwinter Lectures at Austin Theological Seminary in Texas. I had the privilege of meeting Hans-Richard Nevermann. He was at the seminary to be honored at the 50th reunion of the class of his graduating class. We spent several hours together over the course of three days, mostly at meal times. We talked about our churches – mine in the United States and his in Germany. We discussed world affairs. We told about our families and even discovered we had a mutual friend. He was missing one arm, but I never asked him how he lost it. I had to leave Austin before the closing banquet where he was honored, so I never found out why he was being honored. A couple of months after I returned home I learned. I received the Austin Seminary quarterly magazine, and it told the rest of his story.

As a teenager Nevermann was a member of the Hitler Youth. In 1942 he joined the German army and was sent to the Russian front. "Traveling on the troop train from Berlin to Russia across the Polish frontier, he saw from the window a scene of human carnage; some alive but dying, reaching out their hands for aid. He was told by a sergeant that they were unimportant because they were Poles, probably Jews, and not to take notice." In Russia he was injured. For two weeks he wandered in the barren Russian landscape with only snow to eat. Desperate and close to death, he was taken in by a peasant couple who tended his wounds and prayed for him. The experience of that grace, of hearing his name lifted to God in prayer, led to a profound change in his life. His arm was amputated, and after the war he spent time in a

CALLED BY NAME
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

Russian prisoner of war camp. While he was in the camp, he became a Christian, and in 1950 he entered seminary in West Berlin. “A year later, as he was looking up at his reflection in the ceiling light fixture, he lifted up his arm and a repressed memory from the troop train assailed him. He remembered looking out the train window and seeing the wounded and dying with their arms outstretched for help. He turned to a seminary professor for counsel and received his life’s commission: ‘What you did not do at that time, do now.’”

At Austin Nevermann was being honored for his lifetime of ministry dedicated to reconciliation in countries hurt by that terrible war. One of his first projects was constructing a center for adults and children with disabilities. He organized the Action Reconciliation-Service for Peace that has projects in thirteen countries, continuing to build what had been destroyed. One project of special importance to Nevermann is an international youth center in Auschwitz. In 2003 he and his wife Karin participated in the ceremony for the signing of the first ever accord between the government and the German Jewish community.²

The name Jesus means “he saves.” That’s how we know him, through his name that saves us. When he rose from the grave on Easter morning, he overcame every power that can defile our names. When we call in faith on the name of the risen Lord, he gives us all the power he brought to humankind on Easter day. He gives us the power of that name that is above all names, the name of the one who spoke and the world was formed. In Jesus Christ our name isn’t a passing breath that is spoken for a brief time and then disappears like the morning mist. Our name is recorded in eternity with him.

Whatever your name is, something brought each one of us here this morning. Maybe it was a parent’s nagging or a spouse’s urging.

² “Former Nazi soldier, Hispanic leader honored with 2006 ASA Award,” *Windows* (Austin, Texas: Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Spring 2006), p. 24.

CALLED BY NAME
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

Maybe it was conscience or habit, or a deep need to celebrate and rejoice in something greater than ourselves, more powerful and lasting than anything else in life. Whatever it was, listen for Jesus calling your name. You don't always hear it with your ears. More often, you hear it in your heart, a sense of being recognized for who you are, of being loved and accepted and forgiven, of gladness that you are in the presence of someone who knows your name, knows you.

Hearing our name we turn to him, like Mary Magdalene. We call on his name, and that name lifts all our sorrows. It fills us with joy. In that name we have victory over death, over sin and suffering and everything that can harm us. God has raised him from the grave and he calls us to himself. Listen. He is calling, calling your name.