

It's personal
John 20:11-16
April 8, 2007

"Mary," he said. And then she knew him.

She was crying and distraught. It was bad enough that he was dead, bad enough that he had died a violent and horrible death, bad enough that he had been abandoned by almost everybody, bad enough that he was gone from her life forever. But now his body was gone! Indignity heaped upon injustice! Now she was deprived too of even the smallest solace of being able to grieve over his corpse.

She was consumed with grief and anger and fear and dismay, so much so that she did not know Jesus when she turned and saw him standing behind her. But when he spoke her name, she knew him. There, next to the tomb, he met her, one on one, just her and him. And he called her by name: "Mary." It was personal.

That's how it happened. That's how Jesus revealed himself to Mary, and that's how he revealed himself to the rest. The resurrected Jesus met his disciples almost one by one: Mary beside the tomb, a married couple walking the road to Emmaus, a handful gathered behind closed doors, a half dozen on the shore of Lake Tiberias. Paul says later that Jesus did appear on one occasion to five hundred of his followers at once, but in every other report of the disciples' encounters with the resurrected Jesus, Jesus shows himself to just a few at a time.

The resurrection of Jesus was no public spectacle. It was not staged for maximum media exposure. Jesus did not appear before Pilate or the Sanhedrin or show himself to the crowds gathered in and around the Temple. Jesus did not go to Rome or set out on a countrywide tour, meeting and greeting and announcing himself as the Resurrected One. After he was raised from death, he spent just a very short time among just a very few of his closest friends, and then he was gone and seen no more.

What are we to make of this? What are we to make of these very personal accounts of seeing Jesus alive? On the one hand, it casts a cloud of suspicion over the whole story. The only "proof" that Jesus was indeed alive, raised from death, is the testimony of a few of his friends. There is no corroborating evidence, no independent verification, no unbiased reports.

On the other hand, you do have the testimony of the words and the lives of these few eyewitnesses! After seeing the resurrected Jesus -- after their claim to have seen him -- their lives were utterly transformed, from grieving, fearful, and shamed disciples of a slain teacher, hiding in the shadows behind locked doors, to bold, outspoken, and joy-filled apostles of a living Lord, eager to share the news of people being set free and made new!

The entire New Testament is a post-resurrection document. It is from the perspective of witnessing the resurrection of Jesus and reflecting on its implications that the first Christians understood the meaning of Jesus' death and the meaning of Jesus' teaching and the meaning of his coming into the world in the first place. They understood Jesus in hindsight, making sense of all he had said and done backwards, from the perspective of the resurrection. If they had not seen Jesus alive, there would be no New Testament, there would be no Christians, and there would be no church.

But if the accounts of Jesus' resurrection are very personal, does that mean its implications are personal, too ... exclusively personal? Does it mean that the living Jesus seeks only to address the deadening effects of personal sins and to provide a promise of eternal life for individual souls?

I don't think so! When the angels sang at Jesus' birth, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth," it was more than hyperbole. And the resurrected Jesus, the Son of God, surely has the same mission as the Jesus who lived, the son of Mary: "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people!"

The resurrection of Jesus has implications for all of humanity and for humanity as a whole. The power of resurrection is not just about changing individual hearts and minds, but about undoing the work of death and injustice in all its forms. Have no doubt! The resurrection of Jesus has serious political implications. If Jesus is alive, then Jesus' way is vindicated, and Jesus' way challenges our ways from top to bottom!

Jesus' resurrection has profound political implications, but Jesus' way is very personal. Jesus' way is a different way. Jesus' politics is a different politics. Jesus does not come riding on a war horse at the head of a powerful army, ready to vanquish any and all who would stand against him. Jesus comes riding on a donkey at the head of a band of whomever is willing to follow, ready to give all they have to make God's enemies into God's friends. Jesus comes not to take power, but to give it; not to compel obedience, but to invite it; not to exclude, but to embrace. Jesus comes to empower, to guide, to heal, and to save ... one person at a time. It's personal.

That was his way while he lived: not addressing great crowds and enlisting an army of loyal followers, but spending time in conversation with Nicodemus when he visited one night, with a Samaritan woman one day by a well, with a man born blind, with Martha and Mary as they grieved their brother's death, with a small group of his closest disciples just before his arrest.

That was his way then and that is his way now. He comes to empower, to guide, to heal, to save ... you. He does not intend to compel your allegiance, but to win your heart. He wants you to live, to live with joy and purpose, to live well because you know him well and love him well. He wants you to be a witness: a witness to life, a witness to peace, a witness to joy, a witness to him.

We are called to be witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus ... not witnesses to what we've been told, but witnesses to what we have seen and heard for ourselves. It's personal. It's about loving and being loved, about knowing and being known. It's about hearing Jesus calling you by name.

Do I love Jesus? Yes, I do. Do I know Jesus is alive? Yes, I do. Have I heard Jesus call me by name? Yes, I have!

Now, don't get me wrong! I don't hear voices. But I have felt the personal touch of Jesus on my life. I have seen the unmistakable hand of Jesus at work in my life. And I have heard the call of Jesus in very personal and particular ways.

And you will, too. This is what faith is, to see and hear and feel the personal presence of the living Jesus in your life, changing the way you see everything: yourself, your family, your neighbors, the world. It is learning to see and to listen and to live beyond all prejudice -- beyond a Republican world view, beyond a Democratic world view, beyond a capitalist world view, beyond an American world view, beyond a United Church of Christ world view, beyond any world view at all -- just you and him and seeing the world through his eyes. It's personal.