

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
Easter
April 11, 2004

“What Are You Looking For?”
John 20:1-18

Mary Magdalene is bent over on the ground, looking into the tomb,
She is looking for the dead body of Jesus.
But, Mary doesn't find what she's looking for.

What she sees instead are two angels in white,
sitting where Jesus body had been.
And they ask Mary: *Woman, why are you weeping?*
Their question must have seemed, from her perspective,
completely clueless, and completely out of touch.
(They obviously hadn't seen Mel Gibson's Passion, or they would have known.)
But there's little time to explain.

Suddenly, outside the tomb, standing beside her, is Jesus.
We know that, but Mary does not. Mary does not recognize Jesus.
She wasn't looking for him *out there*, out in the garden, not like that.
Jesus asks Mary the same question: *Woman, why are you weeping?*
And then he asks, *Whom are you looking for?*
Well, now that Jesus has asked it, I suppose we must forgive the angels.

It is not the first time Jesus has asked this question.
The last time he asked this question,
he asks Judas Iscariot and the soldiers who had come to arrest him
in the Garden of Gethsemane:
Whom are you looking for?
They said they were looking for Jesus of Nazareth,
whom *they* thought was guilty of blasphemy and sedition
and about to lead an armed uprising to establish himself as King of the Jews.
They did, of course, find Jesus and arrest him in Gethsemane,
but the Jesus they found
was nothing like the Jesus they were looking for.
He did not resist, but went willingly with them.

The time before that is much earlier in the gospel,
when Jesus asks two disciples of John the Baptist
What are you looking for?
They answer, calling him “Rabbi” (which means teacher)
and asking him where he is staying.
He says to them, “come and see,”
so they go with him, and stay with him all that day.

The next day, one of these two disciples, whose name was Andrew, follows Jesus.
Andrew's brother, happened to be a man named Simon.
So Andrew goes to his brother Simon and announces to him,
We have found the Messiah.
And Simon becomes a disciple of Jesus.
This, of course, is Simon Peter.

These are big moments in the gospel story
when Jesus asks this question, *Whom are you looking for?* or *What are you looking for?*
Crucial moments:

First, the calling of Andrew, who then called Peter, to be a disciple.
And the answer: The Messiah.
Then, the betrayal of Jesus by Judas, and his arrest in Gethsemane.
And the answer: A Blasphemer and Enemy of the State.
And now, today, the risen Jesus asks the question of Mary Magdalene.
And her answer: The dead body of the one we thought was the Messiah.

What would you answer be, if Jesus asked you, *What are you looking for?*
It is a question worth asking today, on this Easter Sunday, 2004,
as you and I come to see the empty tomb of our Lord.

We all approach Easter looking for something,
because we all approach God, looking for something.
Maybe you're looking for reassurance that God loves you.
Or you're looking for relief from your guilty conscience, forgiveness and a new start.
Or you're looking for a way to make sense of your life.
Or you're hoping for someone to comfort you,
to heal your broken body, or soothe your broken heart, or fix your broken family.
These are perhaps some of the better things we are looking for when we come to God.

There is, of course, a darker side of our search for God.
Sometimes we come to God looking for God's approval of the opinions we already hold,
or God's assurance that we are already good and do not need to change,
or God's agreement that our enemies are the bad ones
and are the cause of all the trouble in our world,
and need to be done away with.

The history of Christianity is full of instances when we Christians have
recreated Jesus in our own image
and used Jesus to promote our own agenda, and even fill our own coffers.

But whatever we are looking for as we come with Mary to the tomb this morning,
we may be in for a surprise.
Jesus will not be confined by the limits we impose upon him.
Jesus breaks free of our expectations.

On Easter we see that our Savior is perfectly free
to be the kind of Savior he will be.

When we encounter the risen Jesus in our lives, it may be a confusing experience at first.
The risen Jesus is too much for us to wrap our minds around.
So it is a natural reaction for us to try to fit Jesus into our small understanding,
to squeeze him into our comfort zone.

Mary says to Jesus, *Sir, if you have carried him away,
tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.*

The image is almost repulsive, if you think about it.
What if Mary had been right. What if Mary had found the Jesus she was looking for?
What if it had been only the gardener, and he'd said, "Oh, he's over here."
There would be Mary, laying hold of Jesus' dead body, and dragging his corpse away.

I wonder how often you and I try to lug around a dead Jesus
instead of recognizing the living Jesus who is standing beside us.
When it feels like life is a cruel joke that God has played on you,
and you can't imagine why things have turned out the way they have.
Then our faith become old, worn out religion,
just fulfilling our obligations, like a woman in mourning,
going to the tomb to anoint a body.
It's easy to get stuck in a spiritual rut,
where we have figured out just who God should be for us,
and what God should do for us, and for our families, and for our world?
Have you figured out just how Jesus should save you, if he really want to be your Savior?
...smooth out the conflicts in your marriage,
...take away the sickness from your body
...find you a better job...or any job, for that matter.
...fix, or do away with, that person who is the thorn in your flesh.
...throw off the Roman oppressors and establish a new Jewish kingdom.
We get these ideas about who our Savior should be, and what he should do,
and we are driven to despair when we see those expectations
nailed to a cross, and buried in a tomb.
Then we're like Mary, in the early morning of the third day,
the Savior of our dreams is dead to us.
All that's left is to lug around his dead body, wishing he were alive.

But now it is Easter morning,
and it is time to come to terms with the Savior who won't let us drag him around,
the God who refuses to be bound by the limits of our imagination.
It is Easter morning, and instead of finding the Jesus of our expectations,
the risen Jesus is standing there in the garden,
and as Mary will soon discover,
the presence of the risen Lord is all she really needs.

* * * * *

Jesus loves Mary, and he doesn't leave her in agony for long.
He calls her by name,
 and when she hears him speak her name
 something changes in Mary.
She turns to him, and the veil over her eyes is torn away.
She recognizes Jesus and calls to him "*Rabbouni*" (*which means Teacher*).

But old expectations are hard to break, and she wants to hold on to him,
 she wants to cling to him.
She wants to have back the Jesus that she knew, or thought she knew.
But Jesus is who he is, and he is headed back to the Father.
 That is his purpose now. That is where he belongs.
 So he says to Mary, *Do not hold on to me.*
 Don't try to squeeze me back into your box.

And being clear about his own purpose, Jesus wants Mary to be clear about hers.
Now that she has seen her risen Lord,
 Mary is to go to his brothers, his disciples, and tell them what she has seen,
 tell them what the truth really is,
 tell them who she found in the garden
 when she didn't find what she was looking for.

Her encounter with Jesus has given her a new vocation.
Jesus has sent Mary on a mission.

That is what Easter finally does – at least for those who recognize the risen Jesus.
 We are sent to go to others and tell what we have seen.

Probably most of you didn't come here today looking for something else to do.
Life has you pretty tied up already.
Maybe you just came looking for a happy, springtime, thought for the day.
(Especially if you're one of my dear friends
 who just come to church on Easter and maybe Christmas.
But if that's the case, I have to say
 you sure could have picked a less dangerous Sunday to come to church
 than the Sunday when God raises Jesus from the dead.)

So if you came today pretty sure of what you were looking for,
 without expecting very much to change in your life,
 then *maybe* you'll manage to leave today
 without recognizing Jesus,
 without actually hearing Jesus speak your name.

But if, today, or someday, you do hear Jesus speaking your name....
 then there's a good chance you are being given a job to do.
 Because that's what the risen Jesus does.

He calls us by name, opens our eyes to the truth that he is alive
and he sends us to other people,
people who aren't necessarily looking for him,
but who need to have their expectations blown away
and their eyes opened
by the power who gives life to the dead.
and hope to the world.