

# Easter Day

St. Margaret's Church, Annapolis

2010

Alleluia! The Lord is risen!  
*The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

There is a tribe in East Africa in which one's true identity is searched out even before birth. In this tribe, the birth of a child is not counted from the day of its physical birth, nor even the day of conception, as in other village cultures. For this tribe, the birth date is counted from the first time the child is a thought of in its mother's mind.

Aware of her desire to conceive a child with her beloved, the mother goes off to sit alone under a tree. There she sits and listens until she can hear the song of the child that she hopes to conceive. Once she has heard it, she returns to her village and teaches the song to the father so that they can sing it together as they make love, inviting the child to join them.

After the child is conceived, she sings it to the baby in her womb throughout her pregnancy. She teaches it to the old women and midwives of the village so that during her labor and at the moment of birth, they can greet the child with its song when it arrives into this world.

After the birth, all the villagers learn the song of their new member and sing it to the child when it falls or hurts itself. It is sung at special occasions, and in rituals and initiations. This song is part of the marriage ceremony when the child is grown, and at the end of life, loved ones will gather around the death bed to sing this song for the last time.

In the ancient world of Israel, names had much the same importance. To know one's name was to be able to call forth the essence of that person, to have a kind of power over them. That is why for the Jews, the name of God is not spoken.

For Christians, naming a child at baptism is more than just repeating the name chosen by his or her parents. It is to name the child INTO the family of God. And God knows us, each of us, uniquely and particularly by name. Like the song of identity in that African village, our names are an essential part of who we are.

Little wonder then, that Jesus had to call Mary by name before she knew him.

*...she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him... "Teacher!"*

Little wonder that she didn't recognize him at first. Imagine her distress. To do that, we must remember what she and the others have been through. They have watched as Jesus was tortured and killed in an unimaginably brutal way.

They had taken his body, his lifeless, cold body, and wrapped it for burial. Make no mistake: he was dead. And they knew it. Unlike us, who can go through our whole lives without actually touching the body of one who is dead... they knew.

Then they had laid him in a rolling stone tomb. Such a tomb is carved out of – more accurately – *into* solid rock. To enter, one had to duck through the opening and step down into the trench that has been dug in the rock in order to be able to stand around a rectangular slab or table left in the center. Around the outer wall, five or six tunnel-like holes have been carved.

Normally, a body is placed on the table and prepared with oils and spices, wrapped in linen clothes, and then slipped into one of the tunnels which is then sealed with stone and mortar. After two or three years, all that remains are bones, which are reverently removed and place in jars or small casket-like reliquaries. This is the kind of tomb that a family could use for generations.

Jesus' friends and family had laid his body on the stone table in just such a tomb. But when sundown settled on them, it meant that the Sabbath had begun. So they had to cease the burial preparations until the Sabbath was over.

On Sunday morning, Mary had arrived early with the oils and spices to complete the preparations. When she saw that the stone had been rolled away, she alerted the others, who came to see for themselves.

Finally, she was left there, by herself, to weep for her beloved Master. It was then that he came to her. It was then that he called her by name.

“Mary,” he said, and she knew him – and forever after, she – and the world – were changed. Transformed. Made new.

God in Christ calls *us* by name, and we too are forever changed, transformed, and made new. The world is a different place now because death no longer has the last word. Death no longer wins. God has given us, through Christ, the gift of everlasting life. Not immortality – which is to never die – but new life and life everlasting.

But this is no pie-in-the-sky promise. This is now. Today. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, not only does death not have the final word, but sin no longer stands between us and God. And this is the heart of our transformation, our newness.

I am convinced that forgiveness is the key; that Jesus came to embody the love of God in such a way that we would know once and for all time that we are forgiven; that nothing stands in the way of our salvation.

Nevertheless, it is our human nature, it seems, to need to know the parameters of God’s mercy... as if there are rules and limitations to forgiveness.

- Who is forgiven?
- Is there something I must do in order to be forgiven?
- Are there some things, some people who are unforgivable?

Names of notorious evildoers leap to mind.

There is a legend – purely imaginary, of course – which pictures the Last Day, the end of history. Everyone is celebrating, dancing, shouting “hallelujah!” and caught up in the spirit of jubilation. Everyone except Jesus.

He is standing very quietly over by the gates of paradise. Someone asks him what he’s doing... standing so quietly by the gates. He says simply, “I’m waiting for Judas.”

The love and forgiveness of God has no bounds, no limits. That is the scandal of the gospel. We are all offered the grace, the mercy, the forgiveness of God. We are all offered an invitation to share in his resurrection. We are all called by name...

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

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