

## WHO ARE YOU LOOKING FOR?

Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

John 20:1-18

One morning in January 2007, one of the greatest violinists in the world took his instrument to a busy metro station in Washington DC and began to play. Joshua Bell is a former child prodigy and an internationally acclaimed musician; he has received numerous awards and accolades, and has to some degree crossed over into popular culture, playing violin solos in movie soundtracks and making cameo appearances in movies and on television; his instrument is a Stradivarius valued at \$14 million. He spent a morning busking – that’s what we call it when someone stages an impromptu performance in a subway station or park or other public place like that – in an experiment orchestrated by the Washington Post. They asked a noted conductor to guess how people would react. He guessed that out of a thousand people, perhaps 75-100 would stop to listen, that maybe about half of them would recognize that they were hearing a world-class musician, and that Bell might make about \$150. Bell played for 43 minutes with a hidden camera filming the area. 1,097 people came through the station. Of those, twenty-eight gave money – one who recognized Bell, spoke with him, and gave \$20; the other 27 contributed a combined thirty-two dollars. Out of the over a thousand people who passed through the station, only seven paused to stand and listen to the music. Sometimes the remarkable things in life can slip right past us if we don’t know to look and listen for them.

On that first Easter morning, the disciples and the women would have been exhausted and wrung-out, grief-stricken and filled with dread. Traumatized by the violence and betrayal of the crucifixion. They would have been in the midst of all this when they went to the tomb, and saw the stone rolled away. At first, they probably would have assumed that the grave had been robbed or vandalized. The story tells us of Mary finding the tomb in this condition and running to get Peter and the beloved disciple – not wanting to risk being there alone, perhaps – and their seeing that the wrappings were neat and tidy – surely not typical of grave robbers. But then, the the two disciples go away again, leaving Mary there, weeping. She looks into the tomb herself, and she sees two angels dressed in white. Normally, angels bring a message from God. But here, we see Mary so laser-focused on her love and grief and worry over Jesus, that the angels ask her why she is weeping and without noticing how strange it is that they are there, she explains to them. She tells them that Jesus’ body is missing – he has been taken away, and she doesn’t know where they’ve put his body.

And at that moment, she turns and sees Jesus – but in the midst of her grief and bewilderment, she doesn’t realize who she is seeing. Jesus speaks to her: “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Throughout this Lent, we've focused in on the questions of the scripture, exploring the theme of "seeking." We've met the people who sought Jesus, we've remembered that God seeks us, and we've been urged to seek more deeply and fully, to not shy away from the big questions of faith. "Whom are you looking for?" is the question in today's text that captures me, as we gather to hear again the Easter story, to marvel at this hope-filled, seemingly impossible news. Mary has come to the tomb on this Sunday morning – setting out as soon as the sabbath ended to tend to the body of her friend and teacher. It is a deeply courageous and faithful choice; he has been crucified, marking him as an enemy of the powers that be, a traitor and false prophet. Mary is bold, she is loyal, she is loving, and yet when Jesus stands in front of her on Easter morning alive, she does not recognize him. "Who are you looking for?"

Who was she looking for? She was probably looking for the lifeless body of her Lord. Perhaps she was looking for grave robbers, for Roman centurions, for workers who tended the garden. She could not imagine that Jesus was alive, and so he stood in front of her and she couldn't recognize him; she did not expect to see him, not like that, and so she didn't.

I wonder what our false assumptions are that cloud our vision, that prevent us from seeing God, from seeing resurrection, from seeing the living Christ? Where are the places that we could have seen Jesus if we had known to look? Perhaps for some of us, we look for Jesus in explicitly religious times and places – likely you all have come here today, to this church on Easter morning, with some hope or expectation or longing to encounter God, to feel the presence of the divine. We expect to meet God in church, in prayer, on holy days, but perhaps we miss the opportunity to see holiness in our everyday lives.

Maybe for some of us, we have some idea that certain kinds of things are "virtuous," and therefore a better place to meet God – in the beauty of nature, or listening to certain kinds of music, say – and assume that less lofty pursuits aren't the right time or place to encounter the risen Christ, as if God could come to us more readily while we listen to a concerto than a Taylor Swift song, or as if we're more likely to experience the presence of the divine in an art museum than a grocery store.

In today's story, and numerous times after the resurrection, the resurrected Christ goes unrecognized. We *could* stand in judgment of the ones who failed to recognize him; we *could* take it as a stern admonition to be alert, but perhaps the better way is to take it as an assurance and an invitation. There is an assurance the resurrected Christ is present regardless of what we do or fail to do. You don't have to be alert. God's love is with us always, even when we are unaware. And there is an invitation to open our eyes and hearts, to seek Christ everywhere, and to know that signs of resurrection are all around us.

Jesus asks Mary, "who are you looking for?" Rev. Danielle Shroyer's commentary on this passage reminds us that we each have our own idea of who Jesus is, and that none of our ideas or images of Jesus capture the fullness of who Jesus is – just as my understanding of each of you is incomplete and perhaps in some ways incorrect, just as your sense of who I am is incomplete and

perhaps in some ways incorrect, even more so, none of us can know Christ in all his fullness. She writes, “What would it look like for us to see Jesus as he is? Not merely as we want him to be, or even need him to be, but in the fullness of his glory—fully human and fully God? What would it mean for us to love him with our whole hearts, and live for him from that wholeheartedness?”

I’m not sure it’s possible for us to know all of who Jesus is. I think back on my childhood ideas of Jesus, and I can recognize that over my life, my understanding of who Jesus is has grown and changed – perhaps yours has too. We can’t know the entirety of Christ, but I think part of our call as Christians is to keep growing to know Christ a little better.

Mary addresses Jesus as if he were the gardener, pleading with him to tell her where the body has been laid. And he addresses her by name. With that, she sees him and knows him, and understands that he has risen. It is his calling her by name that lets her see past her assumptions and her preconceptions to recognize Jesus, and start to grasp the good news of resurrection.

I am not sure I understand the resurrection. I’m sure I don’t know the fullness of who Christ is. But when Jesus calls Mary by name, I am assured that he knows each of us by name, calls each of us by name, comes to find us when we are lost, bewildered, and broken-hearted. He stands with us, bringing God’s renewing love, whether we are aware of it or not. And he seeks to lift the veil, to help us see new life all around us, to help us know the resurrection for ourselves.

Only seven people stopped to listen to Joshua Bell playing Bach and Schubert in the subway, but all 1,097 people had a little bit of beauty infused into their lives, and I suspect that it uplifted many of them, perhaps in ways that they didn’t quite notice, or couldn’t quite name.

Friends, resurrection is around us all the time, whether we notice it or not. God is breathing beauty and new life into every moment, every day, every place, every person, whether we perceive it or walk right by. May our eyes be opened to that wonder, that power, that hope, as we seek the God who is always seeking us.

Amen.