



## reLent: "relief"

John 20:1-18

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Easter

There's something about being called by name.

I had been sitting outside the Monsenor Oscar Amulfo Romero International Airport in San Salvador for what felt like an eternity. My ride was late — very late. I understood this was not unusual, but this knowledge did absolutely nothing to alleviate my anxiety. I had been invited to preach at a gathering of Presbyterian Mission Coworkers coming from all over the southern hemisphere. That I did not speak Spanish did not concern those who issued the invitation. "Most people in attendance will speak English," they said. Unfortunately, none of those people seemed to be at the airport.

I didn't know the specifics of where I was going, and I had no contact information for whoever was supposed to retrieve me. All I knew was that I had not yet been claimed, and so I sat outside in the hot sun, waiting, with no plan whatsoever beyond what I learned in kindergarten: when you're lost, stay where you are.

Three hours later, having sweat through everything I was wearing, I was staring off in the distance when I heard it: "Jenny!" someone called out. "Jenny!"

They came with apologies and stories of a flat tire, but to be honest, I heard very little of what they were saying, because all I could think was, "Oh, thank God."

My relief was palpable. It was every bit as real as the sun in the sky and the grease on the hands that finally clasped mine in welcome. In fact, for that moment, my relief was the most real thing I had ever known. It flowed through me like a cool breeze, it surrounded me with assurance, and it lifted me back up onto my feet again.

"Jenny," they said, and no longer was I alone and abandoned. Instead, I was known. I was found. Have you ever felt that kind of relief?

"Jenny," they said, and something in me shifted. "Mary," Jesus said, and I imagine something in her shifted, too.

She was in the garden, where the tomb was as empty as her own heart.<sup>1</sup> She wasn't there for any good reason, she was just there because she had nowhere else to be, and she couldn't imagine being anywhere else. She began to weep, because grief shows up where love has always been. And grief doesn't ask permission and it doesn't negotiate, it just takes over, and so the tears kept coming.

She thought he was the gardener, at least in part, I suspect, because scientists have proven we almost never see what we aren't expecting to see, and the last time she saw Jesus, his body was in the arms of Joseph of Arimathea. She knew what the rest of the world knew just three short days ago — that the One in whom they had placed all their hope, the One they had loved until the end, was gone.

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<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to the Rev. Tom Are, Jr. for this insight.

“Mary,” he says, and relief flooded through her body and surrounded her with assurance and lifted her back up on her feet again.

When love calls us by name, everything shifts. Everything changes.

Consider this. Way back at the beginning of John’s gospel, we hear how Jesus’ disciples come to follow him. Andrew brings his brother Simon to Jesus. Jesus has never met this man before, never heard of him before, but he takes one look at him and says, “You are Simon, son of John. You are to be called Peter.” If I understand it, when Jesus calls him by name, he is saying, “I know who you are. I know where you have come from, and who you have been.” And when Jesus calls him by a new name, he is saying, “I know who you are still capable of becoming, who you will one day grow to be.” He is promising him, “There is a future for you.”

The next time Jesus calls someone by name, it is 11 chapters later, and he calls his friend Lazarus, who has been dead for three days, to come out of the tomb. “Lazarus!” he calls. “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus walks out, still wrapped up in his graveclothes, but also wrapped up in new life.

And the next time Jesus calls someone by name, it is Mary, standing in the garden, and it is Easter Day, and resurrection is loose in the world.

When Jesus calls you by name, it is not a casual moment. Everything shifts. Everything changes. It is Jesus reassuring you that you belong. That you matter. That you are known.

There is a very particular kind of relief that comes when we are called by name. Psychologists call relief “release from distress.”

Mary is relieved when Jesus calls her by name. I know that doesn’t sound especially fancy, especially on Easter morning, when we are surrounded by flowers and trumpets and every kind of fanfare. Relief, the way some understand it, is not a positive feeling — it is simply the absence of a negative feeling. But I submit to

you that it is worth considering on this Easter morning because relief is also considered by many who study the human brain to be “the most common, yet unexamined emotion in the human repertoire.”<sup>2</sup> Studies show that, despite common perception and logical assumption, relief offers a significant amount of positivity, because over time, it triggers in us a motivation to carry on even when faced by difficult and painful circumstances. They can’t quite explain how or why this happens — at present, their studies simply observe that it does, with remarkable consistency.

But you and I, and Mary Magdalene, all of us on Easter morning, we understand exactly why relief is such an influential emotion. Because if you chase the word *relief* all the way back to its earliest roots, you arrive at an old Latin verb, one that means “to raise.”

Mary is relieved on Easter morning in the most sacred sense of the word, because she, just like Jesus, is raised. She is raised up out of her distress and despair. She is raised up out of her grief and sorrow. She is raised up out of all of that because resurrection is real and it calls her by name.

Do you see what’s happening in this gospel text? Do you see what’s gospel truth here? Jesus is risen, but Mary is, too. I am convinced, more and more each Easter, that resurrection assures us that everything is going to be okay — not just after we die, but also while we live.

The resurrection of Jesus means that death is defeated. It does not win. And resurrection also means that God is the midst of repairing and redeeming everything about the world, and everything about our lives, that is broken. Everything about the world, and everything about your life, that you do not have the power to make right, God does.

In one of my previous churches, I knew a man who grew up in a home with alcoholism and

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.psychologicalscience.org/news/were-only-human/the-psychology-of-whew.html>

abuse. He survived his childhood and worked as hard as he could to build a different sort of life.

He intended to leave the past in the past. He married a kind woman. He raised his children well. He never drank any alcohol, not once. He erred on the side of gentleness and meekness and never raised a hand against another soul and never told another soul about all that had happened to him. As his own children grew and left home, and as his parents grew old and died, he lived with his secrets and his shame quarantined, convinced that if he let them out, the sickness would infect everyone he loved.

Finally, in his mid-60s, he realized he was so very tired. He walked into an Al-Anon meeting. "My name is Carter," he said, "and I am the child of an alcoholic." "Hi, Carter," they said back to him. And in that moment, he says, the recognition and the reassurance that he was not alone settled deep in his bones, and he found the courage, in fits and starts, to tell them everything. He told it all, and the world did not end. In fact, if you ask him, he will tell you that night is when his life finally began. "It was the biggest relief I had ever felt," he says.<sup>3</sup>

Resurrection happens. God is at work, in the world and in our lives, healing and redeeming and raising up everything in our lives that we ourselves do not have the power to make right. God is in the business of bringing life from that which seems dead. That is God doing what only God can do.

And I promise you — no matter what you are thinking right now, no matter what sort of exception you consider yourself to be — that resurrection is for you. All of you, yes, but each of you, too.

Because love simply does not exist in the abstract. It lives only in the particular. The verb "to love" always requires an object, a recipient. Have you ever tried to love . . . ? Love has to land somewhere. Love has to rest somewhere

particular. We can only love particular people. We can only be loved as particular people.

A few weeks ago I reminded you about Kate Bowler, an assistant professor at Duke Divinity School. Living with stage four cancer, she has learned more clearly than many of us that love is always particular, because our lives are particular.

"There is nothing generic about a human life," she says. "When I was little, to get to my bus stop, I had to cross a field that had so much snow that my parents fitted me with ski pants and thermal boots that were toasty to 40 degrees below zero. I am excellent in the stern of a canoe, but I never got the hang of riding a bike with no hands. I spent weeks of my childhood riding around on my bike saving drowning worms after a heavy rain. My hair is my favorite feature even though it's too heavy for most ponytails, and I still can't parallel park. There is no life in general."<sup>4</sup>

There is no life in general, and there is no love in general. There is only love for you. When resurrection comes, it calls us by name. And when that happens, something shifts. Something changes. And we are never the same again.

What a relief. What a holy, holy relief.

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<sup>3</sup> This man is real, but Carter is not his real name.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens For a Reason (and Other Lies I've Loved)*, pages 124-125.