

**Whom Do You Seek?**  
**Easter Sermon**  
**April 1, 2018**  
**John 20:1-18**  
**Northminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Michael D. Kirby**

Early one morning, Jesus turns to someone, whom we closely identify with him and his ministry, and asks, "Who are you looking for?" One time while he was standing in a garden setting, as someone approaches Jesus, he turns and asks, "Who are you looking for?" One morning while standing in a garden setting, as someone who is closely identified with him approaches, Jesus turns and asks, "Who are you looking for?" No, the iPad's not stuck like last Easter and I'm not having a stroke and I'm not trying out three different openings to this year's Easter sermon.

On this day, when we hear a story many of us have heard more than 50 times, I want us to see something that perhaps we've never noticed before. That question on Jesus's lips, "Who are you looking for?" (more correctly whom do you seek?) is actually in the Greek just two words — the word for whom or what, and the word for seek you. And Jesus doesn't ask that two word question just today in John's gospel, he asks it on three different occasions — four if you want to get technical.

You might remember the first. It was in the text for the first Sunday of 2018, back in the first chapter of John's gospel. In fact, according to John, they are the very first words spoken by Jesus worth recording in his Gospel. That first time, he is asking Andrew and another man, who will become the first disciples to follow Jesus. And Andrew's first word to him when he knows he is talking to the one that John the Baptist thinks is the messiah is "Rabbouni" or teacher. Does this sound familiar?

Of course it does, because today, as risen Christ, after echoing the angels in concern for Mary Magdalene's broken heart and spirit, his next and almost very first words to anyone following his resurrection are again "Whom do you seek?" And though she does not recognize him still, once he calls her name, clearing her vision of the fear and loss so that she knows with whom she speaks, her first word is, "Rabbouni" or teacher.

That's the beauty of the gospel of John. He manages to tell the story we all think we know in ways that help us see something new. But it doesn't stop there. There are still two other times. Back on Thursday night, in the Garden, right after John remembers the disciples falling asleep while Jesus prays, when Judas and the leaders come to arrest him, Jesus' first words to his persecutors are "Who are you looking for?" Not surprisingly, **they** don't call him teacher. They say they seek Jesus and when he answers, they do nothing. He asks again, identifies himself again, and then they arrest him.

When we encounter these kinds of parallels in John we are invited to go deeper, even in an Easter sermon. So what can it mean here, now at the pinnacle moment of the Gospel, at the pinnacle moment in human history, at this new beginning, at the moment when the Resurrection has happened? He asks an old question again?

If this entire gospel has been leading to this moment, the glorious victory of life and love over sin and death, why do his earthly ministry and his risen new life both begin with this question? In this moment when the Risen Christ, the God who has lived a human life and died a human death, awakens to a world where death no longer has the final say, why is this question the only thing that hasn't changed? Whom/What do you seek? What do you want from life?

The people who study this sort of thing tell us that once we've developed an answer to those questions, it's hard to change our minds. Jack and Sara Gorman are a father and daughter team of researchers — one a public health expert, one a psychologist. And together last year they wrote “Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore Facts that Will Save Us.”

They sought to answer a question that seems to nag at almost every debate we are having, in this country at least — why do people cling so desperately to views that are disproven or refuted by facts? They find that it is a trait that shows up in us regardless of temperament, or political or religious persuasion.

Specifically, they set out to study confirmation bias — why people ignore study after study about vaccinations and the risks verses rewards of guns in the home — which led them to the question of what makes people choose only media that agrees with them, some only watching MSNBC and some only watching FoxNews. What they found after years of studies was that confirmation bias, hearing our own opinions supported regardless of the actual facts, causes a dopamine release in our brains. We don't just like being right; we are addicted to it.

And I think that means that when most of us seek out this Jesus person, initially at least, we bring all of our preconceived notions of the world and so we find what we are looking for — only the social justice teacher and protestor; only an historical figure cloaked in mystery who had some good ideas, but is hardly worthy of worship; a martyred victim of political oppression; or perhaps even a figure as to which there is insufficient historical evidence to prove he ever even existed. One of my dearest friends made an offhand comment this week — that he was too educated and had seen too much of life to believe in the Resurrection.

I think in the earliest moments of this morning's text, Mary would agree with him. But it's worth remembering that Mary is wrong in the garden. She goes there looking for a corpse, and no matter what she sees, she holds on to that view until the seeming stranger before her calls her by name.

Friends, Resurrection, by its very nature, changes everything. It blows our confirmation biases out the window. When Jesus asks the two potential disciples his question, everything is just starting. And Andrew is excited and enthusiastic and hopes he sees in Jesus the Messiah who will overthrow Rome. He is wrong.

When Jesus asks the persecutors who come to arrest him, everything is changing. And those he asks are fearful and cynical, bitter and angry, and they see Jesus as a threat they can extinguish forever on a violent and vicious cross. They are wrong.

When Jesus asks Mary, everything HAS changed. She just doesn't know it yet. She is terrified, sad beyond imagining, broken-hearted, and she seeks the missing corpse of Jesus as the personification of all she had hoped for being destroyed. She is wrong.

Have you ever been any of those people? The seeker, the one who is hoping, the one who is excited about the possibilities of following something or someone new? Maybe you've been the cynic or the frightened defender of the status quo, battered a bit by the world, disappointed a few too many times; one who is fed up with mystery and things that you don't understand or that frighten you. And you just want to hold on to something tangible or you are even willing take drastic steps to stop all the changing and chaos. Or perhaps you've been the grieving one, the one whose world has fallen apart; the one who lives in fear, travels in the shadowed darkness, half hopeless, half heartbroken. I don't know about you, but I've been all three.

I think it's important that in these moments of great vulnerability that Jesus doesn't give a speech or preach a sermon. His pronouncement of new life is manifest in a question, "What do you want — in your heart of hearts — whom are you looking for?" What if Jesus is asking this simple question to remind us of something we might miss if we just focus on the question.

Who is there when Andrew is excited and just starting out this thing called faith and discipleship? JESUS IS THERE, concerned with his wants and needs, even if he's wrong. Who is there when the cynics seek someone on which to dump all of their fear and hate and frustration? JESUS IS THERE, concerned for them and the potential innocent victims of their hate and fear, even though they are wrong. Who is there when Mary's heart is broken and death and loss seem to have won the day? JESUS IS THERE, despite her getting it wrong. He is there with compassion, new hope and new life. At beginnings, in fear and transition, in despair and hopelessness, in life and in death, Jesus is there, seeking to understand and meet the needs of those he encounters.

What if Resurrection is a reminder that nothing, nothing will ever silence that persistent, loving, gracing question — a question that calls us back to our core identity as the beloved of God, that reminds us that there is not a single moment we will face when the one whose only agenda is to love us into being will not be with us, offering us another chance to answer the question.

Paul Hewson is still trying to answer that question. He was raised in a Roman Catholic home in Dublin. His mother Iris was very devout and he credits her with helping him to start answering this question. But when he was 14, she died and he struggled. Life didn't go as planned but he says he was intrigued by, astonished by, in his words, "the mind-blowing concept that the God, who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people." But there was more to it. He says in the idea of resurrection he came face to face with the idea of grace, a love that wasn't based in having to get the answer to the question right every time.

Paul is still working out how he answers the question. He says the main way is how he is trying to live his life — his incredible work to end poverty and alleviate disease, his two decades of drawing his colleagues together to raise money, to transform communities. You might not be as familiar with that, but I'll bet many of you have

probably heard him working it out in another way because he's very articulate and he has the knack for knowing that when our answers are combined with music, we can dwell in the beauty and wonder of this mystery.

I won't try to add to the music this morning but I invite you to add it in your remembering:

*I have spoke with the tongue of angels  
I have held the hand of a devil  
It was warm in the night  
I was cold as a stone  
I believe in the kingdom come  
Then all the colors will bleed into one  
But yes I'm still running  
You broke the bonds and you  
Loosed the chains  
Carried the cross  
Of my shame  
But I still haven't found what I'm looking for...*

You don't know him as Paul Hewson but as Bono of U2.

Whom do you seek? What are you looking for? I think that maybe one of the gifts that the Risen Christ gives us this day is in this intimate encounter with Mary. It may be that it's all right to not be certain how to answer that question. But his life beyond death is a reminder to keep striving, to keep trying.

On Wednesday, so soon after this day of joy we will be reminded how often we fail as we try to answer that question, as we mark the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One could look at the harsh reality of his death on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel that day in Memphis and say that death has had the final say. But Damonte Steele and Ben Rutledge would disagree. Damonte is a 15-year-old sophomore and Ben an 18-year-old senior at Pearl High School in Pearl, Mississippi. Damonte is black, Ben is white. They are two of six teenagers from their community who are walking the 50 miles from their school to the Lorraine Motel in Memphis right now, at this very moment. They want to demonstrate how young people have been changed by Dr. King's living legacy, showing their friendship and commitment to his dream. It's worth remembering that the other verse of Bono's song also addresses Dr. King's legacy. Damonte and Ben are answering Jesus' question with their lives. Can we?

Friends, Christ is risen, and he wants to know — whom do you seek? Let's go show him and the world. Alleluia, Amen.