

THE THIRD GARDEN

What is your name? And who gave it to you? Simon became Peter. Saul became Paul. The disciples James and John became sons of thunder. Mary Magdalene became Mary, Apostle to the Apostles. Many people from their time on have either come to see their names in His light or received new ones simply because they encountered Jesus and heard their names spoken in His voice. Becoming a Christian includes a transition from a name to a name with God's purpose and call backing and shaping it.

Without Jesus, we forget our names. We forget who we really are. Like Mary Magdalene, whose vision was stricken by the grief this world visits upon us all, our weak and watery eyes struggle to recognize the presence and work of the Risen Christ in this world. All we can do is wait for Him to speak through our grief. Like Mary, we wait for Him in the wake of His cross and our crosses to call us by our names. We look to Him. We listen to Him speak our names, that we may remember. For our names in His voice reveal a destiny and His power to fashion it for and with us, if we are willing to receive it.

In the Garden of Eden, God named the first human being before the Fall. We became human beings, bearers of the image of God, a little lower than the angels. But the Serpent said, "You are not enough. Being human is not enough. Become like God." And so the cycle began. We disobeyed. We did not know what we had until it was gone. We forgot who we were and we forgot *whose* we were.

Attempting to find ourselves or make a name for ourselves apart from God is the oldest trick in the book. It never works for very long. It lures us down paths that make us feel less than human or more than human, or anything so long as it does not help us become a real human being. Any identity we receive apart from God will deny our humanity through degradation, hubris, or dissipation.

In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus fought for our true humanity. It was there that He showed us what most everything He had told us looked like. He showed us the way back to being human. He said to God, "*Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but yours be done.*" This prophetic utterance is how the clay can remain in the hands of the Potter no matter what.

This utterance is how we begin to recognize our own wills for what they are: vehicles with empty tanks that cannot get us very far unless they are filled with the will and Spirit of God.

Unlike Eden and Gethsemane, the Garden of Resurrection – the place where Mary mistook Jesus for the gardener – is a place of more joy than eternity can exhaust. Yet we could spend an eternity in this garden and never recognize Jesus until He speaks our names from within His new life.

Disobedience makes up the tragedy of Eden. The burnout of a willing human spirit still echoes in Gethsemane. Mary Magdalene carried the tears of both gardens with her to the empty tomb. We tend to encounter the happenings of God in such thin, out-of-the-way places when we have stripped everything but God's purpose for us from our names, which is about the only thing a name can truly carry.

Grief kept Mary from recognizing Jesus. And she fought going back to bed enough to show us this morning that the dawning of hope into human history can more than reckon with the worst of our tears and their causes. Amidst such sharp degrees of grief, we too like Mary start to step outside of ourselves and forget who we really are. Grief disorients us. We start to believe what the world tells us we are. We start to believe that we are what we do, or what we buy, or what we have, or what we do not have. We start to believe that we are who other people think we are, or who we wish we could be, or the masks and images of ourselves we hide behind some of the time. We start to believe that we are products of society more than we are children of God. We start to believe that we are all the things Jesus died to free us from. And when this happens, a blindness begins to veil the things of God from us. A blindness that the resurrection of Christ Jesus pierced once and for all.

Jesus called the first witness to the Resurrection by her name, "Mary!" Only when she recalled herself in relation to the One who is eternal; only when she heard the sound of her name in a voice she thought she would never hear again – only then could she recognize not only who Jesus really was in all of His glory, but also what it means to be a human being.

Christ's resurrection made possible our recognition of truth.

Along with His body, Mary believed that the only proof of her being beloved by God had been taken away. She wept because she felt her old name and her old self return at the thought of His body being removed. Finding His body gone was worse than His death because His would have been the only grave she could point to and say, “This man is how I came to trust God’s love.”

In the Garden of Resurrection, Mary’s weeping reveals that the goal of sin is to take into captivity any awareness of our belovedness. Yet her weeping also reveals how deeply designed we are for love and how attuned we are to its absence. So much so that Mary promised the gardener that she would carry a grown man’s dead body back to the tomb all by herself. She probably would have, too.

If His body could have at least stay buried there, if she could have just tracked it down and kept it safe in the tomb, then at least she would have a stone to remember Him by, like the pillar Jacob made after his dream at Bethel. At least she would have been able to say, “Surely God was in this place and I knew it.” Just when she thought the dream of all dreams had ended in a nightmare, it was not over. It still is not over. It became too good not to be true.

All of us have been promised more than Jacob’s pillow. When God is with us in the third garden and we do not know it, may the Risen Christ appear and call our names.

In John’s account of the resurrection, Mary turned around, which is what it means to repent. In fact, she changed direction twice. She turned from the tomb to the gardener and again to Jesus at the sound of her name. She first turned away from death and faced both her desire for life and her inability to recognize it, being so acquainted and accustomed to death as we all are. What Mary did is all any of us can really do on our own, and even that requires Jesus to ask us why we weep.

Like Mary, we can turn from death to finally face with courage the overwhelming grief that veils us from reality, because that is what Jesus did on the cross. There is nobility in this. Much of the world seeks to keep us numb, to keep us from ever facing our grief, so that our recognition of the Risen Christ remains far off. But immediately after the moment Mary turned from death and in the moment she struggled to recognize life, Jesus called her by name and she turned to Him a second time.

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As a friend of mine once said, “Satan calls us by our sin. Jesus calls us by our names.”

In the third garden, the veil of humanity was lifted. It was lifted so that we may gaze and be healed by life eternal. The Bridegroom has turned our tears into tears of joy. And each of us, one at a time, must cease striving to remove our own veils after we turn from death, lest we go on mistaking Jesus for the gardener. Each of us, like Mary, must learn to trust that when we turn away from death and face the full force of its unreality, we will hear Jesus call our true names sent forth, so that we may no more expect life to come from what is dead.