It can’t be Jesus!
Pastor Hubert, April 1, 2018 – Easter
Scripture passage: John 20:1-18

On that dark, horrific Friday, when Jesus was hung up on a cross on a hill just outside of Jerusalem, his body broken and bloody, the life seeping out of him, Mary Magdalene showed up when most of his followers had scattered. She stayed through to the bitter end and even beyond. Together with the other women, she watched him die; she accompanied his body as it was taken down from the cross and she watched as it was placed in a borrowed tomb. She saw the stone rolled across the entrance. The End.

A few days later, when it seems that there is no hope left, only loss and despair, Mary Magdalene shows up – again. She has risen before dawn and now makes her way back to the tomb, to do what needs to be done, and maybe also to say her final farewell to her teacher and the best friend she ever had.

The pastor and theologian Nadia Bolz-Weber calls Mary Magdalene “the Patron Saint of Showing Up”. Because sometimes, just showing up is all we need to do. Even when it hurts, even when we don’t see the point. Just… show up – and allow God to act in your life.

Mary showed up at the tomb, only to see her worst fears confirmed. Jesus’ body was gone, stolen. Even in death they wouldn’t leave him alone…. She breaks down, tears flowing down her face, her body shaking with anger and rage. His body has to be somewhere… Grasping at straws, she asks some grubby gardener, “Do you know where they took him?”

“Mary”, she hears Jesus say. And she turned to him and cried out, “Rabboni!”, “my teacher!”. It was when he spoke her name that she recognised him, like a sheep recognizes its shepherd. And he knows her, like a shepherd knows his sheep. We recognise the risen Christ when we hear our names called, when he speaks them to us, often when we least expect it. Just ask Mary.

The beautiful thing about that moment though, is not just that she recognises Jesus, but I believe she also in that moment recognises herself. Her true self, the way she was created to be, the way she was meant to be. The way she can now
be. She was lost – but now she’s found by the shepherd. Somehow, all will be well now. Not necessarily easy or comfortable – but it’ll be alright somehow.

Resurrection is so utterly confusing and baffling. You can just smell the chaos and the confusion of that day in the way the Gospel writers Matthew, Mark, Luke and John write about it; each has his own version, often contradicting what the others say. It’s like they’re all trying to figure out what really happened; this shook their world and what they believed made sense. The church is to this day still trying to figure out how and why and what exactly happened that Easter morning. I’m still trying to figure it out. But whatever it was, it’s unprecedented, astonishing, impossible – a mystery.

But even while we stand there in the garden with Mary, trying to come to grips with this new reality – we sense that something has shifted on a fundamental level; something has changed for ever, in the world and in me.

Together with Mary we realize that no matter the mess we’ve made of this world and our lives and other people’s lives, no matter our lies, our selfishness, our arrogance and our addictions – God will not condemn us for all that. In fact, God goes to the depths of hell rather than be apart from us, even when we betrayed and executed God’s very own Son.

This is a God who keeps loving us back to new life over and over and over; and nothing, not even death, can stop that. If that doesn’t change your life, I don’t know what will. God showed us that death has not the final word – God does.

Resurrection is not just something that happened to Jesus one Sunday morning almost 2000 years ago. It’s not just some hope we have for some day in the future when we might live again after the body dies. It’s much more than that; it’s also something that is happening in us right here, right now every day of our lives, every time we hear our name called and we turn… and recognise the risen Jesus calling us. And when we choose to respond to Jesus calling our name, we’ll be like Mary and we’ll know that it’s okay. Confusing and scary and impossible – but okay.

So… where do you need to experience resurrection in your life today – and tomorrow, and next week? What do you need to leave in the tomb so that you may experience new life? What is the darkness in your life that holds you back from who you’re meant to be? Is it the need to control? The fear of change? Is it being too proud to admit you are wrong? The need of security? Money? Comfort? Your prejudices toward people who are different from you…?

We all have darkness in our lives that prevents us from becoming what God has in mind for us. We all need resurrection, life restored, every day. Now that may sound depressing, but it isn’t; because the good news is we experience resurrection in a hundred small and powerful ways every single day. And it all
begins when we stop to listen, and hear our name being called by the risen Lord. Just... listen. Sometimes it takes a profound crisis to make us listen, as in Mary’s case. But it can also be a choice, a way of life; a listening way of life.

As I said, this is not something that only happened almost 2000 years ago between Mary and Jesus. It’s still happening, just look around. Jesus is still present in the world through his Holy Spirit that is empowering us and working through us to bring healing and resurrection to the world. New life starts when we hear Jesus’ voice – and we respond to it with relief and delight, like Mary did. Suddenly she knew that with God, anything is possible, that darkness and death in her soul were replaced by light and life. That’s a pretty big deal! So of course she couldn’t keep that to herself, she had to share it with the others, with the whole world around her. And this morning, it is shared with you.

So how about you? Will you recognise the risen Jesus when he calls your name? Remember, Mary thought it was some common gardener. Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus mistook Jesus for a fellow traveler. When Jesus stood on the shoreline and called out to his fishing disciples, they could not recognize him and thought it was a ghost.

So odds are you probably won’t recognize Jesus when he calls your name. He’ll not look like what you think she should. In Matthew (25:31-46) Jesus promises his followers that when he reappears it will be as the beggar, the stranger, the sick person or the prisoner. Instead you might see a person who feels like nothing more than a nuisance, an inconvenience or a burden. An outsider you don’t have the time for or the patience with to let in. That’s the repeated message of the Easter story. Jesus is already out there in the world waiting for us, his followers, to catch up and finally recognize him.

So this Easter, go into the world with a keen eye, a listening ear and an open heart, ready to encounter the resurrected Jesus in the most unlikely of places, in the people all around you. Do that, and you have God’s guarantee that your life will never be the same again.

Amen!
John 20:1-18 (The resurrected Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene)

1 Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved. She said, “They have taken the Lord’s body out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

3 Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He stooped and looked in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn’t go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that had covered Jesus’ head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings.

8 Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in, and he saw and believed—for until then they still hadn’t understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. Then they went home.

11 Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. “Dear woman, why are you crying?” the angels asked her.

“Because they have taken away my Lord,” she replied, “and I don't know where they have put him.”

14 She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn’t recognize him. “Dear woman, why are you crying?” Jesus asked her. “Who are you looking for?”

She thought he was the gardener. “Sir,” she said, “if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will go and get him.”

16 “Mary!” Jesus said. She turned to him and cried out, “Rabboni!” (which is Hebrew for “Teacher”). “Don’t cling to me,” Jesus said, “for I haven’t yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”

18 Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, “I have seen the Lord!” Then she gave them his message.