

Named and Known
Reading from the Gospels: John 20:1-18

Well, Lebron James was in Charlotte on Wednesday. Dropped 41 points on the Hornets in a 118-105 Cleveland victory, but it was another number that was particularly notable, not only because of how ginormous the number is, but also because of where Lebron achieved it and with whom the number is connected. You see, on Wednesday Lebron became only the second player in NBA history to score 10 points or more in 800 consecutive basketball games. 800! And who's the other player to reach that same insane number? The guy who happens to own the team Lebron torched Wednesday night; North Carolina's favorite son, Michael Jordan.

Reflecting on Lebron's milestone late Wednesday, ESPN's Scott Van Pelt suggested that soon Lebron will be recognized as the g.o.a.t., the greatest of all time, a suggestion that is ludicrously apostate in the state of North Carolina where everybody knows that Jordan is the g.o.a.t., case closed. Yet, Van Pelt offered the observation, not necessarily because he believed it, but because that is the way time works. Jordan retired in 2003, that's fifteen years ago. There's a good

percentage of today's basketball audience that wasn't potty trained or even born when Jordan retired. So, the highlights they see day after day on their smartphones are of LeBron, not Michael. Oh, you can catch a screening of *Space Jam* on late-afternoon cable, but remember, a majority of folks under 25 years of age don't even know what cable is. LeBron, Steph, Durant, and Westbrook are the faces of basketball now, and it won't be long before the mention of Kobe will be associated with an expensive steak instead of the great baller, and if I told you the news that JoJo died this year, only 2 or 3 of you would know what I was talking about while the rest of you would be running to Trader Joe's to get one last box of cookies.

And so it is that a significant percentage of students cannot tell you who is buried in Grant's tomb or will not shudder at the mention of Joe McCarthy; and while they may connect Tiny Tim to an annual Christmas story, the idea of tiptoeing through the tulips would never cross their minds. As the great hymn proclaims, "Time like an ever rolling stream soon bears us all away; We fly forgotten as a dream dies at the opening day."

Inelegantly, my ghoulish portrait hangs on the wall of a church I once served. It's labeled with the years of my service in the same way a gravestone lists a life span – kind of sobering if you think about it. I have been away long enough that the photo and name bear no more familiarity to folks passing by it than any of the other reprobates in that rogue's gallery of preachers.

I used to chafe when my parents would coerce me to *be sure to say hello* to some teacher, preacher, adult authority figure from my childhood. My response was always, and sometimes still is, the same. “*Man, they don't know me. They won't remember. Don't want to waste their time.*” But to be honest, that says more about my insecurity than about their memory. We avoid such encounters because we fear they actually won't know us, won't remember us.

It's our defense mechanism when we fear we're easily forgettable because that pain is far less than if we risked the discovery that we actually are. And so our guarded lives inevitably complicate and even obstruct a core desire of each and every life – to be known, to be loved, to be remembered.

Restlessly we search for these things throughout our lives and very often the quest becomes manically panicked or leaves one spirit-drained and depressed when the search fails to produce them.

We see both moods evident in the person of Mary Magdalene in the darkness of that first Easter morn. Though regularly portrayed in film, sermon, and literature, the Bible doesn't actually tell us very much about Mary Magdalene. We tend to confuse or identify her with all the other New Testament Marys. Yet, if we can peel away all the stories, apocryphal legends, and mistaken rumors about Mary Magdalene, this is what the gospel writers tell us. Matthew, Mark, and John place her at both the cross and the grave. Luke places her at the grave and adds that in coming to Jesus Mary had been released from seven unnamed demons. That's about it.

John is the sole gospel author to feature Mary Magdalene in a one on one chat with the risen Jesus and the poignancy of their encounter only serves to amplify its significance for you and for me. In fact, it has been suggested that the cartoonish, *3-Stoogelike* investigation of the tomb by the two disciples ends abruptly, with the two just returning

home, because the author needed to get them off the stage to focus his spotlight on Mary Magdalene and Jesus.

Mary is distraught, panicked. Mary is grieving. Mary is angry. Mary is confused. Mary is afraid. Mary feels adrift and alone, maybe even forgotten. Mary is you at various points in your life and Mary finds herself at that place you may know all too well. It's that place you had not planned to be, where you hoped never to arrive – sudden catastrophic loss; a heavy shroud of depression; the planner whose plans are nuked by reality, jilted by love, hijacked by injustice, or voided by some impersonal power structure.

You swore you'd never be in such a place but there you are. It doesn't matter whether you are there because of your bad choices or someone else's nefarious intentions because it hurts just the same. Cue Samuel Barber's *Adagio* for your soundtrack and weep uncontrollably because in that particular place and that particular moment life sucks and darkness assaults.

John says Mary Magdalene went out to Jesus' tomb when it was still dark. He pictures it differently than the other gospel writers for a

reason, because for John the power of darkness is everything that strangles, suffocates, violates, corrodes, impugns, tears down, rips away, destroys. Earlier, the gospel writer mentioned what has always been at least one thread in our life narrative with those haunting words: “And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than the light.”

We don't know much about Mary Magdalene but we can assume those seven demons signified a life wounded by the world. Yet, there had been an all too brief visit of hopefulness in the word and person of Jesus, but now in the morning darkness the only thing dawning is the awareness of hopes crucified. And now, now even the broken, lifeless remains of hope have gone missing.

Mary feels so alone she pours her heart out to the stranger, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." It is a dark place where even the lifeless, broken bones of hope have been carried away.

Yet, it is in such places a word may be uttered that when heard can make all the difference in the world. “Mary.” To be known, to be

loved, to be remembered; how consumed our lives are by the quest for these. And how much darkness, depression, resentment, bitterness, injustice, angst, persecution, addiction, violence, and even war are the result of feeling or believing we are not known, loved, or remembered.

“Mary.” The truth of John’s prescient word is revealed. “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it.” “Mary.” It’s just a name, and a very common name at that. How many times in life have I looked up when someone says Matt, only to be embarrassed upon realizing I was not the Matt being beckoned? It’s just a name, but in context it is the declaration that someone out there knows what one author called “the utter particularity of you.” And, depending on the context, that can mean the difference between despair and joy, loneliness and community, pulse and purpose.

Jesus is risen! Alleluia. But that’s just part of the gospel, for this good news is made personal because this risen Jesus knows you and claims you and remembers you in all your particularity and with all your peculiarities. This risen Jesus knows you and understands you when you are certain no one understands you and everyone has forgotten you. It’s a fiercely unrelenting knowledge and love that would

literally go to the grave with you, even go to hell with you and refuse to give up on you.

The psalmist had a sense of this long before Jesus showed up in Galilee. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me. 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways ... If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast. 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night," 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you." It is a truth validated for Mary, for you, and for me even when all has gone dark, "for darkness is as light" to our Lord.

You have a name and you are known and you are claimed and you are remembered. It makes all the difference in the world.

Samuel Wells is the vicar of the historic St. Martin in the Fields parish in London and he shares a powerful story that evolved in his first parish, some 20+ years ago. There was an 11-year-old boy who had started attending the church at the suggestion of his schoolteacher who knew of his troubled life at home. Wells says, “He was an isolated, disconsolate figure who didn’t mix easily and took a greedy share of the cookies after worship.” (Samuel Wells, *The Christian Century*) The church allocated money to enable him to attend a church weekend retreat.

By Saturday morning, the complaints were raining down. He was rude, he was grabbing food, he was bullying the younger children. The adults finally had to talk to each other about it; it was one of those parish conversations where the pastor doesn’t get a casting vote. The teacher through whose influence the boy had first come to church pointed out that, being brought up solely by his young and temperamental father, he was a troubled boy looking for security. Allowances were made, patience was maintained, and gradually the lad began to find his feet among the church family.

Nine months later at a special evening service he was baptized. His father was not there. His mother and brother, living across town,

weren't there either. But about 40 people were, and each member of the congregation was invited to describe what they most valued about being members of that church. One said friendship, another said acceptance, a third said trust. When the boy was asked the same question his narrow, fixed frown broke, for once, into a smile, and he replied, "You didn't throw me out after that weekend."

Fast forward 23 years and out of the blue Wells receives an email saying, "I'm the boy from that weekend." The message went on to fill in the years. Homelessness, his father's struggles with depression and alcoholism eventually leading to his death. The boy, now an adult, had a partner and was helping to raise her two children. He learned the guitar and plays in a band, and he has a meaningful job with a bank. A month later Wells was able to meet him on a return trip from Scotland. He says, "And there he was. Bigger, wisps of beard—but most of all, the mistrustful frown that once was seared on his face had healed into a broad-cheeked smile, a self-deprecating chuckle, a generous sense of wholehearted attention." (S. Wells, *The Christian Century*)

The young man pulled a scrapbook out his backpack and opened it to the middle where there was a time worn handwritten letter that

Wells recognized as his wife's handwriting, "Sam and I are in Liverpool, and last night we saw half the Liverpool soccer team in a restaurant, so we got their autographs for you because we know you support them." "And, on the opposite page, there they were. Six treasured autographs...

"Out of the ruins and rubble of his neglected and deprived childhood, here he held this precious document, like an epistle of hope from the caverns of exile." (Samuel Wells, *The Christian Century*) To be known, remembered, claimed in spite of ourselves — It means the world. It means life. And on this day the risen Christ acknowledges the particularity of you, calls you by name, confirming a love that will never be taken from you. Never forget. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness shall not overcome it; for Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.