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Title: Five Words

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Preaching: Ryan Hazen, Senior Associate Minister

Text: [John 20:1-18](#)

E-mail: [Ryan Hazen](#)

It's April Fools' Day! This is the only time in my ministerial career that Easter falls on April 1st so I have to at least acknowledge it. Easter on April Fools' Day last occurred in 1956 (before I was born by the way) and will next happen eleven years from now in 2029. ¹

Although April Fools' Day has been celebrated for several centuries by different cultures, the exact origins of this day remain a mystery. Some historians speculate that it dates back to 1582 when France switched from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar. People who were resistant to change or were slow to get the news that the start of the New Year had moved to January 1 continued to celebrate it during the last week of March through April 1 and became the butt of jokes and hoaxes.

There's also speculation that April Fools' Day was tied to the vernal equinox, or the first day of spring in the Northern Hemisphere, when Mother Nature fooled people with changing, unpredictable weather and, after this last couple of weeks, I can certainly understand this theory.

In modern times, people have gone to great lengths to create elaborate April Fools' Day hoaxes. In 1957, the BBC reported that Swiss farmers were experiencing a record spaghetti crop and showed footage of people harvesting noodles from trees. In 1996, Taco Bell, the fast-food chain, duped people when it announced it had agreed to purchase Philadelphia's Liberty Bell and intended to rename it the Taco Liberty Bell²

This morning, Mary Magdalene has rushed to the tomb of Jesus and must have thought someone was playing a prank. She must have believed she was on the receiving end of an April Fools' Day hoax long before there was April Fools' Day. Listen to her words as she relates to Peter and John what she has witnessed, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Later, after the two disciples have run to the tomb to see for themselves, Mary encounters angels in the tomb on her second visit there. Again, she wants answers to this mystery - a resolution to this prank. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him."

Then, in her grief and disbelief that this is happening, Jesus asks why she is weeping but she does not recognize him and makes the same request of him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." It's at that moment that what Mary believed to be a prank turns into unbelievable, life-changing reality. And it happens with one word from Jesus – not a theological treatise or a long, in-depth prayer – it happens when Jesus calls her by name. "MARY."

When someone speaks your name, you become aware of their presence. But, more than that, you also become aware that the person knows who you are – knows your identity. She did not recognize Jesus by the way he looked or even the sound of his voice but recognized him when he called her by name. Calling her by name is not just a matter of identification. It is about a future filled with new possibilities. At that very moment, Mary is transformed and reshaped for a future that would be brighter than her past.

Mary Magdalene is an interesting person in scripture. All the New Testament really tells us about this Mary is that she entered Jesus' ministry as he preached throughout Galilee, that she had been possessed by seven demons but was no longer, and, of course, that she announced the Resurrection. We never learn her occupation, the color of her hair, or if she was old or young.

Most of what we know about Mary Magdalene comes to us in the stories of Christ's death and his resurrection. As Jesus hangs on the cross, Mary Magdalene is there, beside his mother, Mary, keeping watch. Finally, the hour of death comes, his body is bound in linen, carried to a garden, hurriedly placed in a borrowed tomb because no work could be done on the Sabbath – a 24 hour period beginning at sundown on Friday.

Jesus dies around 3:00 pm on Friday – the same time the sacrificial lamb would have been led to the temple to be sacrificed every single day. By 3:00 pm, not much time remained to take Jesus down from the cross, get him to the tomb, roll a sealing stone into place and get home before the sun sets. Anointing the body with burial spices would have to wait until sunup on Sunday morning when it would be safe to journey back to the tomb. But, at the first glimmer of sunlight, Mary Magdalene does just that to finish caring for the body of Jesus. Mark's gospel tells us that Mary Magdalene worried with the other women about who they would get to roll away the stone. Resigned to his death, that seemed to be her biggest concern that morning.

Mary, as we would in her position, was expecting to find a dead Jesus. But instead, Mary finds the tomb empty and feels as if someone has taken the body - feels as if she is the target of a prank or a theft. As John's story continues, Mary could not even find Jesus when he stood in front of her,

even when he spoke to her. It has been said that we usually get just what we expect out of life and Mary fully expected a dead Jesus.

Perhaps Mary did not recognize her Rabbi there in the garden because her heart was breaking. This man whose very life and nature was love had been crucified on a cross. How could life be so cruel? Where was God in all of this? As one of your pastors, I know that many of you have asked this very question. The answer for Mary and us is the same – the pain of the cross had to come before the joy of the resurrection. The resurrection validates everything Jesus said and everything Jesus did, including his death on a cross.

With her name on his lips, there is recognition. She turns toward him and calls him "Teacher." Jesus gives instruction to her to "Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene goes to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" It is a simple testimony – only five words - but one that would change the world.

Mary wasn't ready for what she found that morning. Peter and John and eventually the other disciples were not ready for what they found that morning. The religious leaders weren't ready for what they found that morning. They had put a guard on the tomb, not because they expected a resurrection but to keep the disciples from stealing the body. We know the story and I have to believe that even we are not ready for what a risen Savior really means for us.

Every person from that day to this has the opportunity to observe the power of the risen Christ. Even when you feel that you cannot see the risen Christ, the risen Christ can see you and here's the best part – the risen Christ knows your name and proclaims to you this day that he is not dead. He is alive.

The power of the risen Christ is still loose in our world today. He is not dead. He is alive. The Rev. Ronald B. Brown of New Britain, Connecticut tells a story about his own faith journey. He notes that life was a struggle for his parents and grandparents and their theology reflected that. The Jesus he met in church was a friend in the struggle, someone "up there," who would be waiting when his painful life was over to accept him into the blessed peace and prosperity of heaven. Preachers talked about how Jesus saves, and of everyone's need to accept Jesus. It was a fiercely independent view of faith. Personal salvation was the theme of almost every sermon. Jesus saves and he wants to save you. "You must be born again," they said.

With that background, he went away to college and then to Divinity School. In the academic world, he heard different views of Jesus. Some said he was a prophet. Others argued that Jesus' message was about liberation for the poor, freedom for the outcasts of society, that Jesus was the savior of the oppressed. Brown was confused. He knew that Jesus lived in his heart – he was preparing for ordination for crying out loud! He knew that Jesus was important to him, but he wasn't really sure who Jesus was.

Then, right out of school, he landed smack dab in the middle of a New York City ghetto and was told by the Mission Board who sent him there that he was Jesus' representative to these people – that he was the hands and feet of Christ. He was terrified. In the first week, he witnessed the buying and selling of drugs on the street, he fed barefoot, unwashed alcoholics soup and sandwiches in a dilapidated city park, and he had a conversation with a prostitute who told him exactly what he could do with his Jesus. He didn't think that Jesus was anywhere to be found on those streets. How could he represent someone who couldn't be found?

But then, something happened. After the soup and sandwich meal in that little mission, they always sang. Someone always requested the old gospel hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross." It wasn't one of Rev. Brown's favorites, but the college student working with him could play it pretty well on her guitar, so they always sang it. It's a little bit like I always tell Schuyler – I can play Amazing Grace on the piano so if I ever need to fill in some Sunday, every hymn will be Amazing Grace. We'll sing it again and again.

Brown had been working in the mission for about a month when he first noticed it. As they started the first chorus of "The Old Rugged Cross," the glazed look in the eyes of the tattered people began to change. The hardened lines on their foreheads began to soften. By the time they got to the last line, "I will cherish the old rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown," the expressions had changed. Where once bitterness, pain and resentment had lived alone, comfort, for just a minute, reigned. That, this young pastor-to-be discovered, was the power of Jesus. The people who came to the mission started calling Brown by name – Pastor Ron they called him - and with that, Brown began to see Jesus in them.

When his unlikely collection of parishioners left the mission center, the glazed eyes returned, the lines on their foreheads hardened once more. But Ronald Brown had to believe that what he saw in their faces during that hour was no insignificant thing. Somehow their lives were changed in that hour. Next week they would need to be changed again, but that was OK because Jesus would always be there. No matter how bad things got, Jesus would be there--not as a miracle cure or a mysterious force that would eradicate

drugs, poverty, and hopelessness--but as a constant presence in the midst of suffering, a joyful friend in times of celebration, the power in the midst of powerlessness. And, Ronald Brown notes, that same Christ could save him. When Brown was asked for a report of his time at the mission, he gave a five-word report – "I have seen the Lord."³

It's the message of Easter. Christ is alive. He is risen, and he can be seen. It is powerful enough to change people's lives. When you open your life to the power of the risen Christ, you will be able to proclaim five words that Mary proclaimed – "I have seen the Lord." With that affirmation of faith, see what he can do through you.

A first-year seminary student was told by the dean that he should plan to preach the sermon in chapel the following day. He had never preached a sermon before. He stayed up all night, but in the morning, he didn't have a sermon. He stood in the pulpit, looked out at his classmates and said: "Do you know what I am going to say?" All of them shook their heads "no" and he said "Neither do I. The service has ended. Go in peace."

The dean was not happy. "I'll give you another chance tomorrow." Again he couldn't come up with a sermon. Next morning, he stood in the pulpit and asked: "Do you know what I am going to say?" The students all nodded their heads "yes." "Then there is no reason to tell you," he said. "The service has ended. Go in peace."

Now the dean was angry. "I'll give you one more chance; if you don't have a sermon tomorrow, you will be asked to leave the seminary." Again, no sermon came. He stood in the pulpit the next day and asked: "Do you know what I am going to say?" Half of the students nodded "yes" and the other half shook their heads "no." The student preacher then announced "Those who know, tell those who don't know. The service has ended. Go in peace."

The seminary dean walked over to the student, put his arm around the student's shoulders, and said "Those who know, tell those who don't know. Today, the gospel has been proclaimed."⁴

You don't need to be able to preach a sermon but you are the ones who know Christ is risen and that Christ knows your name and you are the ones who know that Christ is with you through all that is terrible and all that is joyful. There are people who don't know. Go tell those who don't know this news – use five words if necessary - I have seen the Lord - it will change your life and theirs.

¹ online USA Today story posted March 28, 2018, by Kelly Tyko, Be Careful Before Biting into Easter Eggs Sunday – It's Also April Fools' Day!

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³ from sermon by Brown, *Who Do You Say That I Am*, found at www.southchurch.org

⁴illustration credited to Steven Molin in *Four Truths and a Lie* at Christian Globe Networks, Inc.