“Named by God,” a sermon for Easter Sunday, 2019

by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

Scripture: John 20:1-18

Although I had always imagined myself being a parent, the whole pregnancy part threw me for a loop. In those first two trimesters of my first pregnancy, it wasn’t the morning sickness or the changes that my body was undergoing that unsettled me. It was the baby, itself. To me, it really did feel like I was growing an alien…an unrelatable thing my siblings and church folk seemed already to connect to and love, but who seemed wholly “other” to me, and therefore, in true alien form, alienated me even from myself…What kind of a woman, I asked myself, could feel so disconnected from this wondrous new life her *own body* was nurturing?

In part because my husband, David, and I are wildly impatient, but also because I was struggling with this feeling of disconnection, David and I decided that we wanted to find out the baby’s sex. I hypothesized that once I knew the sex of the baby, it would no longer feel like an alien, but like the gentle, naive infant that it actually was.

So, with eager anticipation, we went into the hospital at 20 weeks and beheld the incredible detail of this being that was growing so rapdily inside me. It was a boy.

Finally! It was, it turns out, not an alien in there, but a healthy baby boy! Relief, right? Well, yes…there was *some* relief, but, unexpectedly, we felt equally, if not even more intimidated than before. A boy?!? Our ability to generate stereotypes went on overdrive and our fears, and my feeling of disconnection only enhanced…. What if this boy was super coordinated and, therefore, athletic? Would we two, somewhat clumsy dorks be the right parents for him? What if this boy was hefty and wild? Would we two hesitant twigs be the right parents for him? What if this boy loved fast, fancy cars and machine guns?

Would we, the proud owners at the time of an old, plush gold interior Honda civic, and the determined to be never-owners of a gun, be the right parents for him?

We gripped one another’s hand and walked over to the park. We walked, and sat on park benches, and walked some more, and sat on some more park benches, until we had decided, or more likely, had felt God’s gentle nudge to us, that this BOY needed a name.

A few weeks later—weeks in which the baby not only grew, but my stereotyped fears of him grew—we decided on his name: Simon.

And, you know, once we named him…once he wasn’t an alien, and he wasn’t some potential husky, wild, gun-toting jock of a man, but our infant son, Simon—God’s own given into our care for the time being—the connection happened…instantly. Naming Simon was, for me, the divine invitation into this wonder-filled new life—a life yet to unfold, but one that would unfold in the particular, unique way of Simon—made in God’s own image, carrying my and David’s genes and embedded in our love and that of every community in which we would, as a family take part…my pregnancy was resurrected from an experience of odd disconnection to one of joyful relationship, not only with Simon and David and God…but with all those who offered God’s love and support to us on the way. Somewhere, we have a wonderful photo of the three of us at the baby shower our congregation threw for us—David and I embracing, and a big nametag on my belly: SIMON…he, too, right there in the midst of God’s gentle, generous, affirming love.

Naming Simon was fantastically liberating because in naming him, God named me as well—as Simon’s mother…not the mother of an adult man I did not know and had no history with—but *Simon’s* mother…God’s freeing love enacted in this real, embodied relationship between me and this child. This naming of me as *Simon’s* mother (a name that many of his classmates use for me even now….Hi “Simon’s mom”), empowered me to live into this new life of wildly different routines, unanticipated highs and lows, and experiences I could never have imagined.

I know….you may be wondering why all this talk of pregnancy…It is *Easter* morning, not *Christmas* morning, after all!

Well, in our Gospel passage this morning, we hear the story from John’s community of that first Easter morning. There is so much that goes on in that passage—so much that is ripe for reflection and consideration. But this year, the part that my attention has returned to again and again is that moment between Mary and Jesus. Mary is weeping, and mistaking Jesus for the gardener, asks with what I imagine was such urgency and hope where he has moved Jesus’ body. She is looking right at him, speaking with him, and yet doesn’t know who he is. And then... *Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" (which means teacher.)*

It is not until Jesus names her…”Mary!”—that she connects to him and can name him in return—can see his presence—apparently in such different form—even in this new landscape of her life…It is not until Jesus names her, that Mary has the very first resurrection experience.

The other disciples experienced the empty tomb…and for at least one of them, that was enough to “believe”…to place confidence in Jesus, and all that he had taught and fought for, and promised. But Mary, like me, and perhaps many of you, needed the full-on affirming, *relational* experience of resurrection in order to accept and enter the new life that Jesus’ love for us and of us, invites us into. Mary needed to be named by God—by Jesus, God with us, woven into the fabric of our actual, real human selves and relationships—in order to see God’s resurrected presence in her life.

Having been named by Jesus, she seems to be at relative peace. Empowered and blessed by being known to God in this new life—a life that she cannot imagine the next day or week of because it has turned out so very differently than she expected—she does not run to tell the disciples, despite running all about earlier in the morning. She simply “goes” to find the disciples. To me, there is a rootedness, a confidence implied there. The same rooted, confidence that claimed me when I experienced resurrection.

I have experienced resurrection many times since gestating Simon, God naming me again and again. Of course, there was mom…and mom again….but there was “dork” before that, empowering me to quit trying to pursue the elusive popular crowd and live into the joyful oblivion of dorkiness…and there was and is “Reverend Rachel,” and “Coach Rachel” and numerous other names that have invited me into rich, vibrant, liberating new life and relationships.

There have been, of course, a few names that haven’t been given to me by God. I, perhaps like some of you, have been named into roles that were intended to shame or limit me. Not of God, those roles never led me into a feeling of affirmation and empowerment.

But, if I think about it, even in the midst of those “Good Friday” roles, God empowered and blessed me by letting me know that I was still known by him and in him. In the long days inside those roles, I experienced many times what Mary did--a tender soul saying my name and seeming to really see me, “Rachel”, and I was draped in holiness…able then to see God’s presence alongside me...in the person who spoke my name…in the particular tasks of the role that could upend it, or be done in a more loving, generous way. In the midst of a hard day or many days, the gentle affirmation of hearing our name spoken in love can propel us to claim our lives differently for the next few moments, if not much longer….and that is resurrection.

Resurrection can come in a thousand different ways. For Mary Magdalene, and many times for me, it came in hearing God speak her name. I wonder whether it has come that way for you, too?

This is our biggest church service of the year. We will speak many names this morning, including some new to us. Listen for the gentle, freeing affirmation of God as you speak someone’s name, and as your name is spoken…For, it *is* Easter, and the gift of resurrection awaits us all! Allelulia, Beloveds…. The Lord is risen! May we be named by God, just as Mary was! AMEN.