

“Searching for Jesus” – Stephanie Wing, 4.4.10

Mary Magdalene came searching for Jesus. It was early in the morning, and still dark. Her eyes were puffy from tears shed, and her whole body was weak from trauma, lack of sleep, and lack of food, but still she moved forward. Her movement was weighed down with sadness, but she was focused on her goal. She came searching for Jesus. Do you know what it is like to search for Jesus?

In some ways, it is hard for me to imagine. I grew up in a Christian household, and I can't remember a time when I didn't know who Jesus was. I grew up hearing the stories of how much God loved us that God sent Jesus to die for our sins so that we could be reconciled to God and have eternal life. I grew up hearing the stories of the Bible that are so familiar to many of us here, that it is really hard to imagine what it would be like not to know Jesus.

There was a time when Mary Magdalene did not know Jesus. According to Luke and Mark, Jesus cleansed Mary of seven demons. This probably indicated that Jesus healed a physical ailment, but we don't know for sure. We don't know much about Mary before she met Jesus, but after she met Jesus, everything changed. She was one of his closest followers, and she is the only person named by the Gospel writers who witnessed the crucifixion, burial, and the empty tomb. She was also the first to see Jesus after the resurrection, and she was the first one whom Jesus sent out to preach, to spread the good news of what she had seen.

There was a time when Mary did not know Jesus, but once she was touched by the love of God, it changed her life forever.

For all of the disciples, there was a time before they knew Jesus, but like Mary, once they knew Jesus, their lives were forever changed. Our reading from the book of Acts gives us a sermon, or testimony, from Peter. He is in Caesarea, at the home of Cornelius, who is a Roman Centurion. This chapter opens by identifying Cornelius as a devout man who believes in God, even though he is not a Jew. One day, Cornelius is praying, and he is visited by an angel of the Lord. The angel tells him to go find Peter, who was then staying in Joppa, and to invite him to his household. Without delay, Cornelius sent men to find Peter. Like Mary, Cornelius was searching for Jesus.

Back in Joppa, even as Cornelius' servants were on their way to find him, Peter went to the roof to pray. While he was praying, he had a vision in which the Lord told him to eat meat from unclean animals three times, and each time Peter protested. Finally, the Lord said to Peter, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." Peter is confused, but just then, Cornelius' men arrive at the house. The Spirit continues to talk to Peter, and tells him that right now three men are searching for him, and that he should go with them without hesitation. There were many reasons why this was wrong: it could have been a trap set for Peter; it wasn't proper for Jews to visit with Gentiles in this way. This could have looked

bad for Peter and for Cornelius. But Cornelius was searching for Jesus, and Peter was sent to testify about Jesus, to share the good news of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

It's a simple sermon, really. It might not have even received a passing grade in a preaching class. Peter addresses Cornelius' household and simply shares what he has witnessed. He recalls Jesus' baptism, and how Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, how he went around doing good and healing people, and how God was with him. "We are witnesses to all he did in both Judea and Jerusalem," says Peter. "They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses." Then comes the heart of Peter's message: "He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name." As Peter is preaching, the Holy Spirit falls on those gathered together. Those who have been searching for Jesus find him, and their lives are forever changed.

Sometimes you don't know what you're looking for until you've found it. That's the case for people who are searching for Jesus. In some ways, we are all searching for Jesus, even if we've known Jesus our whole lives. Perhaps we feel like Mary Magdalene, groping for something to hold onto after we have

experienced loss or trauma. We might be in a place of darkness and despair. In those places, we might not even recognize Jesus in our lives. Mary turns away from the empty tomb and nearly runs into him, but she mistakes him for a gardener. It isn't until Jesus calls her by name that she recognizes her Lord and Savior. Only then does she know that she has found what she was looking for.

I can almost hear Jesus calling her name: "Mary." It's simple. It's powerful. We are supposed to hear the echo from John chapter 10, where Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep...My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me." The shepherd calls his sheep by name, and they know his voice. Jesus calls Mary by name, and she knows the voice of her Lord, her shepherd, who has laid down his life for her.

How often do we miss seeing Jesus in our lives? Even when we are searching for Jesus, when we feel that Jesus is far away, he is close beside us. Maybe he isn't the gardener in our lives, but perhaps Jesus is in the voice of a friend or family member. Perhaps Jesus appears to us in a random act of kindness, in forgiveness that is granted but not deserved, or through a need that is met when it seemed like all hope was lost.

Jesus calls us by name today, just as surely as he called Mary two thousand years ago. "Mary," "Stephanie," "Andy," "David," "Pat," "Margaret...." And when

we hear the voice of our shepherd, we are charged to go and tell! When we have found Jesus, we must testify and share with others the good news, as Mary did with the disciples, and as Peter did with Cornelius and his household. God still sends us today to testify, to share with others what it is we know: the good news of Jesus Christ, of forgiveness of sins, of reconciliation to God and to each other, of a love so deep, so broad, and so wide that we can hardly begin to comprehend.

Some churches place a very high value on testimony in worship. "Can I get a witness?" the preacher might ask. We don't often set aside time for testimony in our church, and we probably aren't a whole lot better in our daily lives. I recently read a joke: What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with a Presbyterian? Someone who will knock at the door but then not know what to say.

But without testimony, how else is the good news shared? If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound? What about when we experience God's power and love in our lives, or when we see the impact of ministry in our lives or someone else's; if no one testifies to it, how is God glorified? Every Sunday we sing, "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow," but if we don't testify about the blessings that flow from God, how can we really praise God? How will we even recognize God's blessing in our lives, if we don't stop to make an account of what those blessings are?

Our Easter story shows us two groups of people: those who are still searching for Jesus, and those who, having found him, go out and tell everyone they meet the good news. Are you searching, or are you testifying? St. Francis of Assisi famously said, "Evangelize always. When necessary, use words." Much of our testimony is in the way we live our lives, in the way we show God's love to others, even when it is the hardest thing to do. It is also important to remember that when we call ourselves Christians, whether or not we like it, our lives are always testifying to that identity. Imagine that a group of anthropologists lived with us and followed us around for a few years, observing everything. After a few years, they compile their research and present it, saying, "This is what a Christian is." What would they say?

While living the gospel is critically important, it doesn't quite go far enough. We also have to speak, to use our words, and to reach out to others. My favorite definition of evangelism comes from D. T. Niles, a Sri Lankan-born pastor. "Evangelism is one hungry beggar telling another hungry beggar where he found bread." We are all hungry beggars from the beginning. The bread that feeds us doesn't come from our own labor, but comes only from God. It is the bread of heaven, Jesus Christ. Remembering our own hunger, how can we not want to share this bread with other hungry souls?

We are about to join together around the Lord's Table. Here is the bread! If you are searching, here is Jesus! Come, and have your fill! If you have already heard Jesus calling your name, come, eat, and share this bread with the world! You don't have to be able to preach like Peter or pray like Paul. You don't have to have the charisma of Mary. All you have to do is share your story. Invite the hungry to this table, where there is bread abundant. Can I get a witness?