

***Hello!?* - Sermon Based on Colossians 3:1-4**
by David Hindman on Sunday, April 24, 2011

I have done lots of stupid stuff in my life. My most recent memorable idiocy happened last summer. Teri, Grace and I went to a funeral for the wife of a long time friend. John's known me since we were in grad school. He knew my first wife and me, is godfather to my oldest son and officiated at Teri's and my wedding. So we're at this funeral of John's wife and afterwards we head to the reception. Teri's gone on ahead a bit when a woman calls out to me, "Hello!? Hello!?" Her voice doesn't sound familiar at all and so as graciously as I can I say, "I'm sorry I don't know who you are." Embarrassing as it is to admit, it was my ex-wife Betty. How could I not recognize my first wife!? Let me just say she was taller than I remembered, her hair was a different color, I hadn't seen her for 15 years and I really didn't expect her to be there. But none of that cuts it, especially since as soon as Teri saw her, Teri said, "Hi Betty." Still I did not expect to see her there or to hear that voice. Really. I promise.

So on that first Easter morning, Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb and is totally upset. Something terrible has happened. The tomb is open; Jesus is nowhere to be found. Mary races to find Peter and the beloved disciple who come to check it out, too. They see the grave clothes, but no Jesus. As usual Peter is clueless. But the beloved disciple sees and

believes. But believes what? That the body's really been stolen? Or that Jesus really is who he said he is – an open window onto the life and love of God? That Jesus is so full of God he can't be nailed down or sealed away? Or that Jesus has conquered death. Even without clues from the Bible he knows something marvelous has happened. Jesus' left behind those grave clothes because he will never need them again. The beloved disciple sees and believes. Apparently love sees what others do not see. Love sees what cannot be seen otherwise.

Mary is left alone with her fears and grief when Jesus draws near. For whatever reason she doesn't recognize him and thinks he's the gardener. She begs, "If you've done something with his body, tell me where it is and I'll take it away." And then Jesus simply says one word that makes all the difference. He calls her by name. Don't you wish you knew how he said it? Wouldn't you give anything to hear that voice call your name? What was it about saying her name that made the difference and turned Mary from fear to faith and from confusion to clarity? I think love opened her eyes to see that Jesus was there all along. Mary and Jesus' lives were so closely intertwined in love that when he said her name, she instantly knew whose voice it was and that made all the difference. Earlier in John's gospel Jesus says, "I know my own and they know me. I call my own by name and lead

them out into joy and life.” That voice called Lazarus out from death to life, and now moves Mary from despair to joy.

Talk on the phone to someone once or twice a year. See someone every 15 years or so. Recognition doesn't happen immediately. But the voice of someone you love truly and deeply, the face of someone you see regularly - when they call or you see them, immediately you know who they are. You're at one with each other. Love is what opens eyes and ears. Regular intentional contact moves us from acquaintance to friendship to intimacy to life shared. Want to hear Jesus' voice and see him near at hand? Build an ongoing intimate relationship with him through worship and scripture study and prayer and serving the poor. Is our connection hit and miss or irregular or only when convenient and we don't anything better to do? Even if he's standing right in front of us calling, "Hello!? Hello!?" we might say, "I'm sorry; I don't know who you are. And worse, he might say the same to us. In the Bible Jesus usually shows himself to those who love him best. But he promises if we seek him we will surely find him.

So what? If Jesus is just another good guy or wise teacher, or there's already in us an immortal spark living on after death, Easter's not that big a deal. It's just a way to celebrate life's return at springtime, or life's resiliency in tough times, or to make lemonade when life gives you lemons.

But if Jesus is the door letting us into the very life of God, and if death's real and the only way we move beyond it is by the grace of God, and if God raises Jesus from the dead as divine affirmation that Jesus' way is the way to live then it makes all the difference in the world. Here's the Easter promise – the death and resurrection of Christ unleashes Holy Spirit power into anyone who loves Jesus and want to be like him. For John, we can be children of darkness or children of light, children of Satan or children of God. It depends on where our loyalties lie and who owns our heart. We become sons and daughters of God as Jesus' Father becomes our Father. The Holy Spirit gives new birth in us to lives that look like Jesus, the child of God. We become brothers and sisters of Christ as the Spirit molds us to bear a family resemblance with lives like Christ's marked by humility and suffering service, forgiveness and mercy, grace and justice, love for the stranger and the poor and an open table. That's why Easter matters – it's the promise of life for us and not just our brother Jesus. We sing a life song in harmony with his and we make music not even death can silence. Easter's not just about Jesus' empty tomb. It's the joyful story of real life for us, too, here and now. It has the power to change everything: what we hear and see and how we live.

Take the story seriously, but always literally. In John's story Jesus' grave clothes are left behind in the tomb, right? So what's he wearing? What is he clothed in when he leaves the tomb? His birthday suit? Well, maybe a birthday suit of sorts because Easter Day is the first day of new life for Jesus; he is a new creation - somehow the same but forever different. His voice is familiar to Mary but somehow he is also transformed and new and utterly beyond anything known and familiar to us. He can't be held onto by Mary because there's no going back for him. He's left death forever behind to move somehow beyond time and space to be with us in all times and places. Jesus is the naked truth about God and about real life. And at the same time perhaps Jesus is clothed in glory with a life so beyond ours that words simply fail us. And as we follow him as his new born baptized brothers and sisters we leave behind our old ways and he clothes us with this same glory. We walk this new way of life beyond anything we've known so far. That's Easter joy and promise.

In John's story both Jesus' crucifixion and burial happen in a garden. Mary mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Now there's another garden and gardener in the Bible in the book of Genesis. Maybe John tells his story this way so we will see Jesus' death and resurrection as a new creation and a brand new spanking fresh start for a worn out world and weary lives. In

John's garden the tree on which Jesus died becomes for us a tree of the knowledge of good and evil. In his death we know the awful power of evil and what we can do to each other. And we know pure goodness in the one hanging there. The cross also is a tree of life for with eyes to see and a willingness to sit in its shade and make it our abiding place. This garden Jesus works bears fruit of new beginnings and fresh starts and today in that garden we hear "Hello!? Hello!" It is Christ's love calling us to receive the gift of abundant life. He calls us to be clothed in his new life and love and glory making us more than we've known so far. He calls us by name and we are surprised by joy. Turn to him and nothing can quench the fire of God's life in us. It is his gift to share, the best Easter present ever, thanks be to God.