

Lucia Lloyd's sermon
Easter Sunday
John 20:1-18

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Maybe you know the feeling. You're at the grocery store, or the bank, or McDonalds, and someone comes over to you and cheerfully says "Hello, it's so good to see you! How are you?" And your mouth says, "Oh yes, it's good to see you too!" and your mind says, "Ack! I have no idea who this person is!" You try to come up with some kind of small talk that will not reveal that you cannot for the life of you remember who this person is or where you know them from. And sometimes the interaction ends there, and the person wanders off, or you find a way to make an escape, hoping you didn't seem rude. But sometimes, horror of horrors, the person is friendly, pleasant, talkative, and the conversation goes on. You try desperately to look for some kind of conversational clue or context that might help you, while simultaneously trying desperately not to reveal that you have no idea what's going on. It becomes clear that this is someone you've got some kind of relationship with, someone you really ought to know. Now you're not just worried about embarrassing yourself by revealing that you are a total idiot, now you're also worried about hurting the other person too, this nice person who thought you were their friend. Sometimes it works. Either the bluffing carries you through or the clue appears and you remember in time. But not always. I remember one conversation in which I had no other option but to say, "I'm so sorry. I've forgotten your name." And she said, "Carol." And I had the horrible realization that I *still* had no idea who she was. I just looked at her blankly. She said, "Carol Goodman. Susan's mom." And then immediately it all came back: she was the mother of one of my daughters' friends. Mrs. Goodman, of course. We'd had plenty of conversations. But I'd always seen her with her daughter. Coming across her in a new and different setting, I simply did not recognize her. As soon as I did recognize her, I remembered that she was always sweet and funny and nice to me and the kids, that she was someone I'd always liked. If only I had not just made such a total fool of myself, she was someone I'd be delighted to see. Of course I knew her!

So I am very sympathetic when I read in today's gospel about Mary Magdalene, who comes across the risen Christ and has no idea who he is. She assumes the guy she's talking to outside the tomb must be the gardener. She doesn't recognize that it's Jesus. I know the feeling.

The problem I had that day in the grocery store with Carol wasn't that I didn't know her. I did know her. The problem was that I didn't know I knew her. Once I realized who she was, I realized that I had known her for a long time, and had liked her for a long time. I think that's the way we are with God. The problem isn't that we don't know God. The problem is that we don't always know we know God. Here on earth, we go through our doubts and our struggles. But when I picture our arrival in heaven, I picture it like a recognition scene. "Oh yeah! It's you! We've known each other for years and you've always been so nice to me! I'm so sorry I didn't recognize you before! It's so wonderful to see you!" And God gives us a big hug and welcomes us home.

What God is doing here is giving us the opportunity for some of that experience of heaven, that recognition of someone who's always loved you that you didn't recognize at first, and God gives us the opportunity for some of that experience of heaven even during our lives here on earth. The risen Christ shows up and says, "Yoo hoo! It's me, God! I've been here loving you all along, but you didn't realize you knew me. You've always known God, you just didn't always know that you knew it." Throughout the gospels, we see various people who know God but don't know they know God. Some of them realize quickly who Jesus is, some it takes a while, some never do. What we see in this scene at dawn, is the realization that dawns on Mary Magdalene that the person standing in front of her is not the gardener, not some travelling rabbi with some good ideas, but it is the God she has always known, and didn't know she knew, but who knows her and calls her by name. He has come through suffering and death to show her that God's love is more powerful than death, he has come back to life to show her that God's love is life-giving and eternal, he has come to meet her so she will know that he is the God she has known, and now knows better than ever.

She goes off to tell the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" That is what we give thanks for today, the love of God who keeps loving us even when we respond to him like people standing in the grocery store making fools of ourselves for not recognizing someone we've known for years. We give thanks for the love of God who is willing to go through any suffering, no matter how severe, to show us who he is and how far his love goes. We give thanks for Christ's resurrection, and for the opportunity it gives us to say with Mary Magdalene, "I have seen the Lord" and to recognize that not only does God know and love us, we know and love God too.