

Congregational Church of the Messiah

Fourth Sunday after Easter

April 20, 2008

“What’s in a Name?”

John 20:11-18

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Identity theft is a serious issue in today’s credit-card world. At a recent Guild of Service meeting, an attorney shared practical ways to reduce the likelihood of having to face the hassle and embarrassment of having our identity stolen and used against us.

In the world of global Internet, access to personal and financial records of a person means his or her name is only the initial access point. Often that leads to providing more information than you ever thought possible about your past financial records, your past employment records, your past credit history, the names and records of your parents and relatives, where you have lived, fame and fortune or lack thereof, and the list goes on and on.

I wonder if God is worried about identity theft. Not yours, but His! How many people are taking His name in vain, using it not for respect, but just out of habit, and not even thinking about to whom the name refers?

I wonder if we have often become so busy, distracted, or preoccupied that we totally forgot that God is everywhere, all the time and knows what is happening in each of our lives and wants the best for us all the time.

God knows each of us by name. He even calls us by name and sometimes people hear that call and recognize Who is calling, and then everything changes.

The experience of hearing God calling, and answering the call has happened many times. Sometimes the persons share the experience with others.

It happened to a grieving woman in a garden when her beloved had been killed and buried. She came to tend to the body as was the custom of her people and found the body had disappeared. The place where it had been lain in a rock tomb was empty.

While she was standing outside the tomb she noticed a man standing nearby who spoke to her saying, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (John 20:15)

“Supposing him to be the gardener she pleaded with him, “Please, sir, if you have carried him away tell me where you have laid him and I will go and take care of him.”

(John 20:15)

What's in a Name?

Jesus' death had hit Mary Magdalene very hard. She was a strong woman. She had followed Jesus during His ministry. Now she was standing alone outside an empty tomb. Faithful to the bitter end!

Mary knew Jesus well, but with her swollen, tear-filled eyes and heavy heart she supposed the man standing nearby was the gardener. Even when he asked her questions, she had no clue who the man was.

Then Jesus said her name. One familiar word: "MARY."

Immediately she recognized who was speaking. She whirled around and threw herself at His feet crying, "Teacher!" It was like a total reunion with a long lost soul-friend. She did not ask questions. She responded with her whole being to a reality she knew was true. He was the Jesus she knew.

What's in a name?

A name can mean the entire world for a person. It can be the restoring of a relationship broken by anger, harsh words, wars, suffering, political views, or circumstances beyond anyone's control.

I expect there are certain names that we will remember all of our lives. I will never forget my third grade teacher at Marengo Street Elementary School in South Pasadena. Her name said everything about her way of teaching and our attitude toward her. I will never forget the name, "Mrs. Axeman."

Sometimes people create nicknames for people they know well or personal terms for people in their family. Even if someone legally changes his or her name, God is aware of who each of us is.

The message this morning is simply this.

Your name refers to far more than just who you are today. It carries with it something of what has made you the person you are from your past. It includes many talents, gifts, scars, and awards that you have earned or received over the years. It includes triumphs and failures.

Moreover, your name also conveys hopes and dreams not measured by plaques or families. You may have thoughts and goals, dreams and aspirations not seen by others but which are a real part of your life. God knows all of them.

Mary did not know what to expect when she started following Jesus. There were wonderful healings, teachings that had the ring of eternal truth in them, great times of

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fellowship with the disciples. But occasionally, Jesus would talk about what was to come, and she and the disciples really had a hard time fitting what He said into what was happening: He was talking about dying, rising, and returning but that he would never leave them alone. He would always be with them—even to the end of the world.

Here in the garden, by the empty tomb, she heard Jesus call her by name, and her life changed.

When she heard her name, Jesus became real to her in a physical way He cannot be for you and me. “Jesus said to her, ‘Mary, stop clinging to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to My brothers and tell them, I ascend to My Father and to your Father, to My God and your God.’” (John 20:17)

There are two keys to the message today:

First, God knows each of us by name—who we have been, who we are and who we can be with His help. God will guide us to the most joy-filled life possible if we follow Him.

Second, we have the same God and heavenly Father as Jesus Christ. God, Who kept His promise to be always with Jesus, will be always with us.

We can respectfully call on God by using any of His Holy Names, for they each refer to God's Power and Grace. God knows when we call Him, He will work through us and others to transform the world until His kingdom comes and His Will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.

Amen and Amen.