

Mistaken Identity
John 20:11 – 18
Sunday, March 27, 2016 (Easter)

Have you ever been mistaken for someone else?

When I was in seminary, we had a Dean of Student Life. She served as sort of a pastor for the students. She was a very nice lady, and it was her job to help us or provide counseling or guidance when we needed. She was someone we could go and talk to, someone who would listen. She was someone who was in relationship with each one of the students. We *knew* that it was her job to care about us.

But as I was walking down the hall of the main building one day, she was coming the other way, and she looked at me with a great big smile on her face and said, “Hi, Matt! How are you doing?” I didn’t feel right correcting her at the time, so I just let it slide. But from that time on, every time she saw me for the next two years, she called me Matt. After a while it just became too awkward to correct her. I had *friends* who *did* correct her. She would refer to me as Matt, and a friend would say, “Oh, you mean Patrick?” But she would keep right on calling me Matt! So for my first two years of seminary, I was Matt.

Except with this *other* professor who got me confused with my friend James. We were both taking his class, and we realized toward the end of the semester that he thought I was James and James was me. Which would have been alright, except *I* was always prepared, did my work, participated in discussions in class, and *he didn’t*. So I got a *B* and *he* got an *A*, because this professor thought I was someone else!

Mary thought that *Jesus* was the *gardener*. Did you catch that? It says, “She turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him!’” *Supposing him to be the gardener*.

I mean, this is the man who, just a week ago, was riding into Jerusalem, being cheered and praised as the new king of Israel, and now he’s being mistaken for the gardener! And it’s not like this is the first time *Mary* has ever seen him. This is *Mary Magdalene*! She *knew* *Jesus*! She had been following him for the past three years or so, seeing him, walking with him, talking to him, eating with him just about every day! She was at the cross when he died. She was at the tomb when they buried him. *Mary knew* *Jesus*! But she thought he was the gardener.

Because she wasn’t *expecting* to see *Jesus*, not alive anyway. She had come to his tomb to take care of his body, according to Jewish customs. She was expecting to see a corpse. She was expecting *Jesus* to be lying there, wrapped in linen burial cloths. It was early in the morning, before sunrise. She wasn’t expecting anyone else to be there. She wasn’t expecting anyone to talk to her. She *certainly* wasn’t expecting to find the stone rolled back and the tomb empty!

She thought he was the gardener, because *Jesus* was dead! She knew that. She was there. She saw it happen. She had been mourning for two days. So this man shows up and asks her why she’s crying, and it *can’t* be *Jesus*! *Jesus* is dead. It has to be the gardener. That’s the only other person who would be there this early in the morning. She thought he was the gardener because she wasn’t expecting to see *Jesus*.

And the question for *us* is, are we? Are we expecting to see him? Are we prepared to see Christ alive, in the world, today? Because if we say that we believe in the resurrection of Jesus, that's not just something that happened 2,000 years ago but then he went back into the tomb. If we believe this, then we believe that Jesus is *still* alive today, that he is still risen today, that he is still out there at work in the world today. If we believe this, then it doesn't just mean something 2,000 years ago. It means something for our lives today.

So are you expecting to see him? Will you recognize him when he shows up? Or will you just think he's someone else and keep on going?

When I was in college in Nashville, a friend of mine was walking downtown one evening, and he noticed something going on across the street. There was what looked like a homeless man sitting on the sidewalk, and a group of young men were gathered around him, harassing him, laughing at him, and kicking some of his stuff around. My friend shouted out at them to knock it off and leave him alone, and they just kind of laughed and walked away. And when they cleared away, my friend called out and asked the man if he was okay. The man looked up at my friend and smiled at him.

And it really affected my friend. He was telling me about it later that night, and I remember at one point he said, "What if that wasn't just a homeless man? What if that was God, and he just *looked* like a homeless man, to see if anyone would help him out?" That might sound crazy, but it probably sounded crazy when Mary went back to the disciples and said, "I have seen the Lord!" What if Jesus still shows up looking like the gardener today? Would we recognize him? Would we take the time to notice?

A pastor I know told me this story about a young woman in his church. She was on a train, and the man who punches the tickets was coming through. He would come along and the passengers would just hold them up without even looking at him or stick them in that slot on the seat in front of them. He would punch the ticket and go on to the next passenger. He came up to this young woman, and she noticed that he was wearing one of those pocket watches with the chain on it. Her grandfather always wore one just like that, and it reminded her of him, so she struck up a conversation with him. He stopped and actually sat down for a moment and they talked; nothing huge or profound. It wasn't a deep spiritual conversation or anything. And at some point she said, "Oh, I don't want to keep you from your work." And he said, "No, it's just nice to be seen."

It's just nice to be seen. I mean, here's this man who, day after day, hundreds of passengers probably see him. But no one actually *sees* him.

What if we treated every person we meet as if they could be the resurrected Christ – if we saw Christ living in them? What if we *expected* to see the risen Lord? If we lived in the possibility that Jesus could show up in our everyday lives; if we lived in the possibility that each person we talked to could be the resurrected Christ; how would that change the way you talk to people? How would it change the way you treat people? How would it change your relationship with that person at work or school that you can't stand? How would it change your willingness to help someone in need? Would it stop you from judging someone if you saw Christ living in them? Would it stop you from talking negatively about someone if you saw Christ living in them? Would it help you be more patient with someone if you saw Christ living in them? What if, before you criticized someone, you saw Christ living in them?

This day, the day of resurrection, invites us to consider the possibility that each person we meet, each person we interact with, could be the resurrected Jesus. Because Christ is risen! He is alive, and he is out there in the world, and you never know where you are going to run into him. You never know who he is going to look like: the gardener, the homeless man, the person on the train, the kid at school who gets picked on, the single mom struggling to get by.

We never know, but we *expect* to see him everywhere we go, in everyone we meet, so that we can say, like Mary, “I have seen the Lord! I have seen the Lord in you and you and you.” That’s what it means not just to *believe* in the resurrection, but to *live* in the resurrection; to treat everyone like Christ is living in them. Because he *is*.