

**Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019.**

I want us to think about today as “Fill in the Blank” Sunday. Oh yes, the title “Easter Sunday” should be enough to energize us. But “Fill in the Blank Sunday” is even more to the point of today.

If I was to ask you which single word in the entire service this morning should be left blank so that each of us can engage Easter in a highly personal way, what would your answer be? Any nominations?

Let me modify the question. Which single word or name should be left blank? Any nominations?

Bingo! Yes, replace the name “Mary” with a blank, and then fill in the blank with your name. That’s right. Your name.

Remember our lesson this morning (**John 20:1-18**). As Mary enters the tomb, she hears a voice. “Mary.” And she recognizes the voice. “Teacher” she says. She gets it. The Lord is risen. He is alive. He engages his good friend Mary. He reassures her: “Mary, yes, it is I.”

This exchange is at the heart of Easter. Jesus, a dear friend and possible Messiah, is crucified, dies, and is buried. Like Mary, we are deeply saddened. We have gone through Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. And like Mary, at times our hopes were heightened.

At other times during that week, however, our hopes were tested and dashed. Heavy with sadness, we honor the dead and help the family. Through scripture and music and prayer and art, we go to the tomb with Mary, where we discover, as she did, that Jesus is alive and well, thus confirming his Messiah identity.

The risen Christ speaks. Not to someone else. But to you and me, individually, one by one. And he calls us by name. “Charles, yes, I am alive, and you, Charles, are my witness.” He fills in the blank with my name. And he does the same for you.

This is the Easter message. Jesus lives and we are his witnesses. We are now the custodians and conveyors of the Good News.

And what is our response? Well, it varies, doesn't it? What doesn't vary are two things. The first is that he speaks to us individually by name. And the second is that we make some kind of response. Maybe the response is "Here I am, send me." Or maybe it is "I'm shocked, I need more time." Or maybe it is "This is some kind of trick, I'm out of here."

And maybe we make all three responses at different times in our lives and with different levels of certainty. We're all over the place when it comes to how we respond when Jesus says to us in the coolness of the tomb, "Charles, I'm alive, and you are my witness."

At that point, I didn't fill in the blank. The risen Christ did. My job now is either to honor that selection or to ask for more time. And the truth of the matter is that nearly all of us ask for more time. Mary is the exception. And this is why she is such an important figure in the history of the Church, which is the history of accepting and fulfilling the designation of servant.

The amazing thing about this designation is that it is never withdrawn. The Risen Christ continues to get our attention, and we continue to wrestle with a response. Thank God for the Risen Christ's patience. The door is never shut. The application is never pulled, at least by Jesus.

"Fill in the blank." Not with Mary's name. Not with anyone else's name. With your name, when you're ready. "Charles, where are you in your response?" Well, Lord, it's this way. Sometimes I'm there and sometimes I have my doubts. Sometimes I'm ready to go to the mat for you. And sometimes I'm not ready. What I can say with certainty is that I really appreciate your getting my attention by using my name and staying by my side. I want to say yes. I really do. Keep the door open, please."

And what is the answer of the Risen Lord? "Take the time you need, Charles. Just know that I am with you for ever. And, by the way, that goes for everybody. Here is a stack of applications. Just tell your friends to fill in the blank with their name, and I'll be in touch.

Amen.

