

We're nearly a month into our social distancing protocols, and since that time, the Disney animated movie *Frozen Two* has been playing on a non-stop loop in my household. I'd love to tell you it's only because we're isolated, but that wouldn't be true. The truth is, this movie has received top-billing from the moment it became available to stream, and it will most likely screen at least a thousand times more on our home television before Sardis' next Easter service.

On Good Friday morning, I watched the movie again with my daughters. When the movie started, I had a few thoughts: 1) Can we skip the first scene with the parents, and get straight to the song, "Some Things Never Change?" 2) Please, God, if you are merciful, let my girls be entertained and content for twenty minutes so mommy and daddy can finish a few emails and 3) I can't believe I'm saying this, but I really wouldn't mind watching *Moana*, or the first *Frozen*, or even an episode of *Paw Patrol*, just for a change of a pace. All of this is to say, the last thing I expected was for our viewing party to be a muse for my Easter sermon. But hey, ours is a God of wonderful surprises!!!

So...at the height of the drama that is *Frozen Two*, Princess Anna finds herself overwhelmed with grief and sorrow. She has lost the friends she holds most dear. The future she hopes for, the future she longs for, the future she believes in has vanished. Her words evoke despair:

I've seen dark before, but not like this
This is cold, this is empty, this is numb
The life I knew is over, the lights are out
Hello, darkness, I'm ready to succumb
I follow you around, I always have
But you've gone to a place I cannot find
This grief has a gravity, it pulls me down

I see a lot of Mary Magdalene, and indeed all of the faithful women who followed Jesus, in Princess Anna. Like Anna, Mary Magdalene had found her compass – her friendship with Jesus illumined how love can transform loneliness. In Jesus, Mary met someone who looked past all of the pretension, all of the systematic bureaucracy that defined worth and value. Jesus was rooted in humanity. He was

a teacher and a master who served his disciples; he was a man who treated women as helpmates; he was a prophet who wasn't persuaded by power; he was a host who offered an open table; he was a neighbor, even to his enemies. He was Mary's friend. And he loved her, because like all of us, she was God's. And Mary, seeing the life of Jesus, believed, with all her heart, that one life, lived with all of God's potential, would change the world. Mary believed that the life of Jesus revealed God, not just now, but from now on.

And then Friday happened. What piercing, shocking grief. At first, it's like a movie or a play. "Oh, that's clever," you say, "A little suspense before the encore." But the matinee ended with a final curtain, and Friday afternoon turned to Friday evening, and the grief hung over an impossibly-long Saturday.

Like Anna, I imagine Mary's grief had a gravity that pulled her down.

In *Frozen Two*, Anna finds her strength from an inner voice.

You are lost, hope is gone
But you must go on
And do the next right thing

Can there be a day beyond this night?
I don't know anymore what is true
I can't find my direction, I'm all alone
The only star that guided me was you
How to rise from the floor?
But it's not you I'm rising for
Just do the next right thing
Take a step, step again
It is all that I can to do
The next right thing
I won't look too far ahead
It's too much for me to take
But break it down to this next breath, this next step
This next choice is one that I can make
So I'll walk through this night

Stumbling blindly toward the light
And do the next right thing
And, with it done, what comes then?
When it's clear that everything will never be the same again
Then I'll make the choice to hear that voice
And do the next right thing

I believe that Mary Magdalene heard a strong inner voice as well, perhaps what we articulate today as God's spirit. Somehow, somehow, Mary was determined to do the next right thing. Perhaps, she, of all those who shared in that final meal with Jesus, best understood what he was talking about.

Yes, today's text includes a spirited foot race featuring Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and their affirmation/confirmation of exactly nothing. Maybe all the exercise wore them out, but upon seeing the empty tomb, the two men return home. This display of impassiveness is similar to their inaction while Jesus was at trial, and on a cross – they stayed away. Hiding, silent, bewildered, paralyzed with shock, and doubt, and grief, and shame.

But it's Mary who's putting one foot in front of the other. In the midst of a world that will never be the same again, she, along with Jesus' mother Mary, stays with Jesus on Golgotha. And over the weekend, she makes all the preparations to prepare his body for burial. And on Sunday morning, she overcomes the quicksand of her grief, and takes the first heavy steps from her home to the tomb. When she sees the tomb is empty, she takes action; she calls for the disciples to help. And when they return home, prior to chauvinistic authors giving them credit for unspoken witness, it is Mary who demands more. "Okay, yes, this tomb is empty, but that's not good enough. I've got to look again. I've got to find my friend. I've got to be present. I've got to do the next right thing," she says.

And she hears her name. "Mary." Imagine that, God speaks her name, in a language she can comprehend, from the lips of a friend, who is ascending from this world to the next.

"Don't cling to me," her friend says. "What you have known will always be so. I need you to let the others know that they, too, can hear God call their name."

And so Mary does the next right thing. Mary squeezes her friend tight, perhaps even grabs fistfuls of his robe in her shaking hands; she feels the energy of that embrace, the energy that love brings, and gently kisses him on the cheek, and lets him go. And in a daze, half skip, half run, half wobble, she travels down the road to tell the others, "Jesus, our friend, has returned. He greeted me by name, and wishes to greet you, too! I have seen him with my own eyes, I have heard him with my own ears, I have hugged him with my own arms, and I have kissed him with my own lips. I know his presence in my heart, and soon, so will you!"

You wanna know what the story of resurrection is? I think it's two-fold. The first part is knowing our names. Yes, my name is Robert, Bob for short, after my grandfather, and each of you have given names, too. And collectively, as a group, we call ourselves Sardis Baptist Church. But what it means to know our names, is to live our names. It means, recognizing that as created beings, I, Bob, each of you, and us, Sardis, we have been made in the image of God, each of us empowered to do the next right things of God.

The second part of resurrection, I believe, is being able to hear God call us by our name when everything will never be the same again.

For when we recognize our name, and when we are open to hearing God's call, burning bushes cannot be consumed, passing storms cannot drown out God's still small voice in silence, and large stones are rolled away to reveal new life: God's presence joins us, greets us, fills us, equips us, empowers us, emboldens us, transforms us.

On that very first Easter morning, Mary knew her name, and she heard it, too. She reminded others that they had a name God was eager to call as well. And she must have been persuasive, because two thousand years later, she's telling us the same.

Because of Mary, I witness resurrection in countless things: animated movies; daffodils in March; the kindness and exuberance of my children; the healing powers of broken bread and shared wine; needed rhythms restored by Sabbath; virtual meetinghouses substituting for physical ones; Corona's reawakening of our call to prioritize need over greed, family and friends over work; neighbor over self,

THE NEXT RIGHT THING
Bob Stillerman
Easter Homily, 4-12-2020
John 20:1-18



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

and authentic life over manufactured life. Yes, Miss Mary's weaving together all sorts of resurrection tales!

Sardis Baptist Church, this Easter morning, Miss Mary, in the footsteps of Jesus, invites you to hear God call your name. And know this, not even the powers of death, will prevent God from rolling away the stones that keep your heart from hearing such a call. God's drama is good, y'all. It's grand, and gracious, and ever-unfolding. And we are part of it!!!

Sardis Baptist Church, God's calling your name. May you hear it right now! And may each of us do the next right thing: encourage our neighbors to hear their names, too. Amen.