

**Sermon preached at the Church of the Holy Trinity, Philadelphia
Easter Day, April 8th 2008
by the Reverend Alan Neale
“Mistaken Identity”**

When I was in Plymouth, England (serving as a young, new priest... oh, that seems years ago) an older priest told me this story. It was a Monday, his day-off and, of course, he was in mufti, in civilian clothing, without the ring of confidence... the clerical collar. He left his house and, as he was walking by his neighbour's house, he heard the wife call to her husband, “Oh look... there goes the vicar... disguised as a human being!” Mistaken identity! Time to rub your eyes and look again!

In 2002 the film “Catch me if you can” starring Leonardo DiCaprio was released. The film is based, rather loosely, on the true story of Frank Abagnale... a man who managed to present him, rather successfully, as an airline pilot, an attorney and, even as a doctor... all without any training!
Mistaken identity! Time to rub your eyes and look again!

In the last parish where I served in England, my father was visiting. I wanted to show him one of the two churches in my care... an old church, part of which was six hundred years old and which stood in the grounds of a private estate. Trying to find the key to the church, my father said, “Look here comes the gardener”. The gardener, dressed for work, was in fact the son of a baronet, the senior partner of a long-established law firm in London, the owner of a Queen Anne manor house and, in effect, the squire of the village!
Mistaken identity! Time to rub your eyes and look again!

In today's Gospel (John 20:1-18) Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb where, the night before, the dead, battered, bruised, weary body of Jesus had been laid. Mary comes to mourn... to have some form of last contact with her beloved and precious Jesus. And then... glory of glory, alleluia of alleluias, the living Jesus appears before her. But what does she see? Instead of the Lord of life... instead of the One who has conquered death... instead of the Almighty, All Victorious Resurrected Lord... she sees... a gardener! “Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have taken my Lord away, tell me where you have laid him!’”.

Mistaken identity! Oh dear, sweet Mary... it's time to rub your eyes and look again!

We cannot be sure what it was that led to this most amazing instance of mistaken identity! Perhaps it was grief and sadness, an overwhelming sense of melancholy... even depression; perhaps it was an innate tendency to expect little, to expect to be disappointed; or perhaps it was a sense of shame that she (and others) had not done more to protect and proclaim Jesus when he was alive. Whatever it was... it led Mary to mistake the identity of the One who stood before her until... until something happens. "Jesus said to her, Mary". And then all heaven opens, her eyes become clear, her senses are quickened, her heart beats, her pulse races... she sees Jesus before her. No need of books, no need of classes, no need of lectures, no need of group studies... she knows that this is Jesus and he is alive... alleluia!

Of course this business, this dynamic, this experience of "mistaken identity" seems to occur often.

We look at the church and we mistake it for a group of quarreling, querulous, quiescent individuals... oh this is mistaken identity, it's time to rub your eyes and look again. The church, in the mind, in the heart, in the purpose of God is, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, to be "the most dangerous, hope-filled place in town", and it is to be, my description of choice for this church "a welcoming community of miraculous expectation and transformation". It happens here... week by week, day by day!

We look at those around us and we often are tempted to despair... oh they will never change, oh they will never find hope, oh they will never come to their senses... oh this is mistaken identity, it's time to rub your eyes and look again. That person, those people about whom you are tempted to despair... they have been made by God, they are loved by God and in them God looks to work resurrection, re-birth, regeneration.

We even, when we dare, look at death and we mistake it for the end, the last word, the snuffing out of an increasingly flickering and feeble candle... oh this is such a case of mistaken identity, it is time to rub your eyes and look again! O death, where is thy sting, o grave where is thy victory. Death is not the end, it is not the last

word... it is the gateway into new life, resurrected life. Those whom we love but see no longer... they live, they live, they live for evermore... oh, doesn't this make our heart sing, even at the grave we make our song, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia.

And then, of course, we consider ourselves, we reflect upon our lives and upon our living and we are tempted, at times, to despair... friends, this is surely, this is definitively, this is assuredly a case of mistaken identity... it's time to rub our eyes and look again. And here comes the story which I tell every Easter Day. The story of a young priest trying to impress his boss... the senior pastor. The young man trains, almost drills, each member of the youth group to learn the Easter greeting... when you hear the greeting "The Lord is risen", you are to reply, "And also with you". Easter Day comes and I, oh I mean the young priest, is at the church door almost preening himself with pride as each young Christian responds correctly until... until one young lady approaches the church door. The senior pastor greets her with the traditional greeting, "The Lord is risen"... there is a silence, she is trying to remember the correct response and then blurts out, "Oh... and also with you". Friends, what profound theology came from her mouth... The Lord is risen and also with you... with me. We can change, we can be set free, the time has come for our liberation, our redemption, our rescue and our renewal. "Behold now is the time"... the resurrected, living, loving Lord Jesus stands before each one of us... whether we are beginning our lives (as are those to be baptized), whether we are coming to the evening of our lives or whether we are engaged in the business of simply living... Jesus stands before us.

You may be weary with crying, worn down by despair, wasted by disappointments... it is time to rub your eyes and look again... Jesus is speaking your name... hear him, turn to him, live for him. And you and I will be changed... for eternity!

Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia. AMEN

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