For every sermon I preach I have to find a starting point. Even when I am sure of the direction I want the sermon to go, or the points from the text I wish to emphasize, I really need that starting place as the first step to presenting those important points. I don’t know what process other preachers employ, but this is the only way that works for me. And sometimes it causes a great deal of trouble, when I have other things on my mind and cannot focus. Maybe this says more about my psyche or personality than I should want you to know, but it is what it is. Our minds work in different ways, we all have different personalities and different ways of dealing with events and feelings; and we may try to control these events and feelings, but often things have to work themselves out, and to a certain extent we are powerless until they do. And it becomes Saturday afternoon, and the sermon is still undone. But usually a solution comes, may appear from an unexpected source, a beginning I can’t resist.

Telling you this is my starting point today. Because I had to leave behind Good Friday in my mind and attitude before I could address Sunday morning. (And lately I’ve felt a lot of Good Friday.) But the only way that can happen, I think, is to understand that the joyful Easter attitude can only come out of a mighty
act of God’s grace, and not as an act of our will. There is a limit to how much we can talk ourselves into being contented or happy. So perhaps Mary Magdalene in this passage represents all of us- in that her Good Friday feelings could only become Easter joy when the Lord appeared and spoke to her. And so, Easter becomes that surprising and irresistible starting point for us. What we believe about the world and life and death radically changed at the miracle of Sunday morning.

In John, the Easter story begins with Mary: early, in the darkness, as though she couldn’t sleep for sorrow, she rises to come to the place where they buried Jesus; there she finds the heavy stone was rolled away from the entrance to the tomb; she runs to the house where the disciples were staying and brings a couple of them back with her; and even after they have left the grave, she remains behind, weeping. I think Mary here is the deepest expression of that Good Friday feeling. She alone goes to the tomb to mourn, perhaps to speak to the dead man through the stone door. And we can see in her how that dark feeling grows, from the surprise at the gaping hole in the earth and the aching emptiness as she ponders how someone could intrude so, to break into that tomb- a pain that finally becomes despair, thinking she will never have the opportunity to say goodbye properly, now
will never have this place to return to because he is gone, no place to come to remember. Even the wonder of seeing the angels cannot distract her; even if they seem to speak kindly to her, they don’t help her find him; so she turns to someone, anyone, who can: the gardener or the caretaker- maybe she doesn’t mistake Jesus as the gardener so much as she wants him to be the gardener- the man in charge of the place, and bound to know all the comings and goings. In desperation, we grasp at straws, and if he can’t help, well, we will go to someone else. Perhaps Mary has already turned to go away, before Jesus can speak a second time, turned to resume her search somewhere else. But this time Jesus speaks her name. And she turns to him again.

I’m sure you can recall the great hurts of your life, as well as the greatest joys. But did they ever occur so closely together, as here at Mary’s recognition of Jesus? Here in one instant of Mary’s life is every human emotion, capped off at last and crowned by an indescribable joy.

But what brings about the transformation of her emotions? Only this, an act of grace. Mary didn’t figure out who this stranger was, he revealed himself to her. It was an act of divine grace, and we know this in two ways. 1) He didn’t have to appear to Mary. Whether she was or wasn’t one of the inner circle of disciples is
unimportant, he could have appeared to her along with all the others later that night or at any other time. So why come to her that morning? I don’t like to play up the sentimental aspect of biblical stories, so I would discount any explanation that has Jesus feeling sorry for her. I think he appeared to Mary to prove his grace, to show her and the rest of us that he is still near to us; that the aloneness and the pain, that the Good Fridays of our lives, are not the final word, but rather, that our Lord may speak, at any time, a word of grace and love to us.

2) And here is that word of grace. He speaks her name. It’s not that she finally recognizes his voice or his intonation, but that she understands that he knows her. The real power and beauty of this passage are in this word—her name—and to see it we must know that only here Jesus speaks her name in Hebrew, not “Mary,” but “Mariam.” That’s how he knows her—us: completely, deeply, from birth, knows our names and nicknames, knows our hurts and knows our ticklish places, knows the things we try to hide, knows everything we need, and comes to us, speaking our name in the language we best understand, calls to us in the exact manner that will cause us to see him. Here is such profound love—as he keeps coming to us, and perfect grace—as he speaks so that we will know he is there.
I don’t know how appropriate it is to bring Humphrey Bogart into the Easter sermon, but surely you remember when Rick and Ilza are at the Casablanca airport at the end of that movie, and she thinks he is boarding the plane to Lisbon with her, or that maybe he is giving his “Exit Visa” to Victor and she will stay with in Casablanca with Rick. But he sends her off with Victor, because “You’re part of his work, the thing that keeps him going.” She can’t stay with Rick, she has that job to perform. He tells her, “If that plane leaves the ground and you’re not on it, you’ll regret it- maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon and for the rest of your life.” So she has to go with Victor: his love for her and her love for Rick, both, demand that she go. That’s grace, too, and it isn’t always easy. Anywhere there is love- especially love that sacrifices- that is grace.

So, here’s the connection- what I hope is the “wow finish” to the sermon, a phrase Rick uses earlier in the film: Mary Magdalene has a job to do. Jesus says to go tell his brothers that he is soon ascending to God. And so she goes, although it is obvious that she really wants to stay with Jesus, embracing him, living in his presence, hearing him speak her name. And we, too, have a job to do.
The gospel of John makes a big deal of Jesus sending the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, when he goes away. And one reason is this, I think: to keep us from trying to hang on to Jesus, trying to hold on to the feeling- look at how he rebukes Mary in verse 17. Rather, by the Comforter’s presence, we realize that our Lord goes with us wherever we are, whatever our circumstances, whatever job we are given to do. Jesus has ascended and we can no longer hold onto him, must not cling to Easter sentiment but rather trust in the grace that knows us, knows and speaks our names; and that guides us to others out there in the wide, lonely, broken world who need holding and comforting, too, who need a word of grace from the one who knows them so well, who even now is calling out their names.