

Divine Surprises

Scripture

John 20:1-18

¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, **“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom 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, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, **“Mary!”** She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, **“Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’”** ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

Taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

Sermon

Happy Easter! Today we have gathered together in this place to celebrate our risen savior with our brothers and sisters in Christ. Today we unite with our brothers and sisters around the world in proclaiming “Jesus is risen!” I am so glad we get to celebrate this wonderful event together today.

Today, more than any other Sunday of the year, we remember the key to our Christian faith: Jesus’ Resurrection. Because Jesus rose from the dead, just as he said he would, we can be confident that Jesus will accomplish all he promised. Because Jesus’ human body was brought back to life, we know that the living Christ, not a false prophet or impostor, is the head of God’s eternal kingdom. Because Jesus was brought back to life, those that have asked God to forgive them of their sins and accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior can be certain of our own resurrection; we know that death is not the end for us. Because Jesus was resurrected, he was able to tell us that the divine power that brought him back to life is now available to us to bring our spiritually dead selves back to life to spend eternity in heaven with him and God.

We Christians are an Easter people. We have hope for the future, on this earth and in eternity. We have a sense that Jesus is still walking among us, preparing the way, alive and well. And we know that God has not abandoned us. And all this knowledge can surprise and amaze us from time to time: that God would love each of us so much, He would do all He has done to bring us back to Him.

If we read the Bible and if we look through our almost 2000 years of Christian history, we will see countless ways that God has surprised people throughout time. And I am sure that many of us here today can say God has surprised us in many different ways. God’s revelations were especially evident during the time in which Jesus walked on this earth.

Throughout Jesus’ entire life, God continually surprised the people that were around Jesus with the events that surrounded His Son and the things he did. First, how Jesus was conceived was a surprise to his mother Mary and his “step-father” Joseph. Then he was not born like royalty. God could have chosen anywhere for His Son to be born, yet He allowed Jesus to be born in a place that was something similar to what most scholars believe was a cave. While Jesus was growing up as a child, we are told that teachers in the Temple were amazed at his understanding and his answers about God when he made visits to the Temple.

When Jesus started his ministry, Jesus surprised many people with the miracles he performed: he healed the sick, brought sight to the blind, and brought others back to life. He surprised people with those whom he chose to minister to, the people he chose to surround himself with were not the most religious and were not at the top of society’s social ladder. The majority of the time, they were the least, the last, and the lost.

Then the sacrifice God had His Son make for humanity “while we still were sinners” shocked his followers at the time and continues to amaze us this day.

I can only begin to imagine what Jesus’ followers were feeling that morning of which our scripture lesson today is about. Just think how distraught and lost they were feeling when they

awoke that morning. The man who they had been following for almost three years, the man who they had personally witnessed perform astonishing miracles like no other person had ever done before, the man who spoke so eloquently about God and the Hebrew scriptures that he made them want to drop everything they had and follow him; the man who they had seen challenged by many of the religious leaders but with great wisdom and love he completely left them astounded with his responses.

These disciples had given up everything to follow Jesus because they believed he was the Son of God, but they watched him be brutally crucified days before. Now his lifeless body was lying in a tomb. I am sure they thought it was over. I am sure they were fearful the same might happen to them because they were his followers. I am sure they had no idea what they were going to do and probably began to doubt all they had seen and done those last few years of their life. I am sure they begin to doubt as to whether the man they had been following was the Messiah.

Then Mary discovers that the tomb was empty. At first she thinks someone had come and taken the body, so she informed the other followers and they too come and see the empty tomb for themselves. They eventually go back to their homes because they “they did not understand the scripture” or Jesus’ predictions he had made about his resurrection.

But as Mary is outside the tomb weeping because of everything that has happened, Jesus calls her by name, and she gets the shock of probably anyone’s lifetime. She realizes he is alive. Jesus has been resurrected, and Mary is given the opportunity to be the first person to exclaim this to the world. Jesus could have chosen to show himself first to anyone who had come to the tomb, but he chose Mary. The first evangelist was a surprise because at that time she was just a lowly woman, the bottom of the social order, someone who was not supposed to be teaching or telling anyone anything. Mary becomes the first person to have the opportunity to exclaim that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. And when she does, it surprises everyone she tells.

One of the things I believe we can learn from this today is that we must understand that God consistently surprises us in how He chooses to accomplish His will in this world. He constantly surprises us in who He chooses to use as His hands, His feet, and His voice in this world. I know He surprised me when He called me to be one of His pastors, and I know many of you are surprised that He can use anyone who went to Auburn.

But, God has done just this throughout His history: chosen people who do not speak eloquently, who do not seem by worldly standards to be the best choices. We must remember what Paul exclaims in his first letter to the Corinthian church: “But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God” (1 Cor 1:27-29).

Another thing we can learn from this scripture is that God can use any situation for the betterment of His kingdom. Now please do not get me wrong here, I am not saying God causes bad things to happen. I do not believe God intentionally brings harm or extreme distress to anyone. I know for a fact God never tempts people. What I am saying is God can work with the bad to bring about good. God could have kept Jesus from the suffering and pain of going to the cross, but He let him go there for us. And God brought something incredible out of that.

What we hopefully understand is that most of the time, God's ways of doing things is not often the way we would have chosen to do them. Many times, we may question why God does not do something we think He should, but God's ways always seem to turn into blessings.

The question I want to leave you with today is "How is God surprising you today?" Are you finally hearing how much God loves you, a sinner, and wants you to turn back to him and seek his forgiveness of your sins? Is Jesus calling your name, as he did Mary's at the tomb, asking you to do something for him? Or are you surprised where you see Holy Spirit moving in our world today?

I can promise you this. If you seek out and are a part of whatever and wherever the Divine is surprising people today, you will find a joy and peace beyond anything this world has to offer.

Sources Used

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