

Surprised by God
Isaiah 25:6-9; John 20:1-18

April 12, 2009

Easter Sunday

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After our new President graduated from Harvard Law School at the age of 26, the University of Chicago Law School created a faculty position tailored just for him and then invited him to apply for it. When Mr. Obama arrived at the campus for the interview, he spent a few moments chatting with the dean's secretary. The secretary was so taken by his grace and personal charm that she reportedly said, "Some day that young man is going to become the governor of Illinois!" I guess he surprised her, didn't he!

This church usher was surprised one day too. A visitor arrived at church, an older woman. The usher greeted her and asked where she would like to sit. She said that she would like to sit near the front. The usher shook his head and cautioned her against sitting near the front, saying that they had a particularly boring guest preacher that day. The woman bristled a bit and asked, "Sir, do you know who I am?" The usher said no. The woman said, "I am the guest preacher's mother." The usher asked, "Ma'am, do you know who I am?" The woman said no. The usher said, "Good!" and left quickly. Surprise, surprise!

Have you ever noticed that the Bible is full of surprises? The last become first. Tax collectors and sinners eat with Jesus. Those who mourn are called "blessed." Surprises everywhere you turn. But surely there is no greater surprise in the Bible than the one we celebrate this Easter morning. You see, the disciples of Jesus thought everything was over. We would have too. If we had seen the crowds turn against Jesus and Pilate wash his hands of any responsibility, we would have thought everything was over. If we had heard the people calling for the release of Barabbas and the crack of the whip upon Jesus' back, we would thought it over. If we had seen him nailed to the cross and heard him utter those words of dereliction, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" we would have thought everything was over too.

So try to imagine the despair of poor Mary Magdalene. She must have been a remarkably strong woman, truly one of the heroes in the New Testament, in my opinion. She was from the city of Magdala, hence her name. It was a predominately Gentile city and was known for its sexual promiscuity. When the city of Magdala finally fell, its reputation was so bad that the rabbis attributed its fall to promiscuity.

Theologians have long wondered why Mary of Magdala was so devoted to Jesus. According to John, she was the only one to remain with Jesus to the end. According to legend, she was a prostitute before she met Jesus, but there is no biblical evidence to support that. We do know that Jesus cast seven demons out of Mary. Keep in mind, now, that back in their day “demons” may have been a physical illness, perhaps a seizure disorder. They may have been some moral or spiritual illness that they couldn’t explain. They had no other way to account for some things other than to say that they were caused by a demon. Jesus cast seven “demons” out of Mary. Perhaps she was so profoundly grateful that she refused to abandon him. Let others do what they will, but Mary was determined to be faithful to her friend and Lord.

Have you ever notice that in John’s gospel Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone? In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Mary was part of a group of women that went to the tomb. But in John, Mary was alone. John was a theologian. He often used things like this in a symbolic way to make a theological point. I’ve wondered if this was John’s way of telling us something about Mary, maybe that she was “alone” in a deeper and more profound sense. She wasn’t just by herself, without company. Mary was *alone*.

You may have felt this at some point in your life too. Maybe your spouse died. In the months afterward even when you were in a group of people, you felt alone. You weren’t by yourself, but in a more profound sense you were alone. Maybe it was when your children all moved out. You watched some parents celebrating that moment. Finally they were liberated. Not you. You felt alone.

John says that Mary was alone that first Easter morning and that it was “dark” when she went to the tomb. In his unique way, John has just told us a tremendous amount about Mary of Magdala. She was alone and in darkness.

Remember, she was also there to see the one to whom she had given her allegiance humiliated and tortured. She watched him die an agonizing death upon a cross. She was there when he said, “It is finished,” and then bowed his head and gave up his spirit. On that Sunday morning, she was going “alone” in “darkness” to the tomb. She was going there to do the proper thing for the one who had saved her from something awful. She was going to give Jesus a decent burial. That first Easter morning that was all Mary expected to happen.

Now try to see this next moment from Mary’s perspective. She discovered that the tomb of Jesus was empty, but that only compounded her sense of aloneness. She thought someone had stolen his body. The thought of resurrection does not even appear to have occurred to her. She assumed someone had desecrated the body, heaping hurt upon hurt for Mary. John says that she turned and ran to tell Peter and another disciple the terrible news. They then ran to the tomb and saw for themselves. They saw the burial cloths. But she was right; there was no body. Do you remember what happened next to Peter and the other disciple? John says that one of them believed and then they both went “home.” End of story for Peter and that other disciple. They both went home, John’s way of saying that they still didn’t understand.

The real drama of this text revolves around Mary of Magdala, not any of the other disciples. John says that Mary went back to the tomb. Notice she was alone again. If it was indeed the tomb I visited a year and a half ago, it is garden-like. The tomb itself is hewn into a mountainside. We stooped to enter the doorway into the tomb. Inside it had probably 200 square feet of space that was divided into several small chambers. One chamber is where a body could have been laid.

John says that Mary was standing outside the tomb weeping. “She bent over to look into the tomb,” John says. She saw two angels. They said, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She expressed her sadness that someone had taken Jesus’ body. John says that at that moment she turned and saw Jesus, but she didn’t know that it was Jesus. He said to Mary, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”

Thinking him to be the gardener she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Now,

we don't know why Mary didn't recognize Jesus earlier. Maybe she was just too distraught. Maybe she had tears in her eyes. For some reason, Mary didn't recognize Jesus, until she heard this next word: her name.

"Mary," Jesus said. And in that instant, Mary recognized that it wasn't the gardener. Surprise, surprise! It was her friend and Lord!

When she heard her name, Mary turned and called out in Hebrew, "Rabbouni!" which means "teacher." And apparently she grabbed hold of Jesus, maybe hoping to never be alone again.

Jesus told Mary not to hold onto him. I think it was his way of telling her not to hold him back because his work was not finished. He told her to go instead to his brothers—those two who had gone back home and the others—and tell them the surprising news. I would love to have been there when Mary arrived at where the disciples were staying. I can see her out of breath, disheveled, trying to talk, eyes as wide as saucers: "I have seen the Lord," she declared, and then told them of all that she had experienced.

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It's Easter morning. We actually had a sunny sunrise service earlier this morning. And now we have this great crowd here. The cross is beautifully transformed before us. You might think that no one would be in "darkness" this sunny Easter morning or that no one would feel "alone" with all these people around. But I can guarantee you that with the sun shining and a crowd of people, some of us, in a more profound sense, can feel darkness and taste aloneness.

Easter is for you, all of us who feel hopeless, abandoned, alone. It's for people who, for whatever reason, feel like the sun hasn't risen in their life. On this day, the God of surprises reaffirms God's everlasting love, the promise of new days, and invites us to weep no more. Hear the good news: Christ is risen! Alleluia!

Closing Prayer

God of resurrection hope, come to all long for the rising of a new day. Fill their hearts and minds with the surprising joy of our risen Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.