

“Surprised by Joy” John 20:1-18 Easter Sunday 2019

Have you ever had to convince someone that you're alive? Turns out it's harder than you'd think according to Charles Hubbard of Austin, Texas. A few years ago Charles, a Viet Nam vet, received a letter from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs informing him that he was dead, and that his family needed to return thousands of dollars in benefits he had received! Charles, a victim of stolen identity, also had his checking account closed by the VA. He did the extensive work required to prove that he was alive, but even so, the VA informed him it would still take eight months for him to be officially brought back to life! Only then could he expect to begin receiving his pension benefits again.

Jesus also experienced some difficulty convincing people that he was alive on that first Easter Sunday. That's somewhat understandable, as many people had witnessed his cruel death on a cross overseen by professional executioners the preceding Friday. Here's what happened on Sunday morning as it is told in John's gospel.

Early 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. (John 20:1-10)

Mary from Magdala, a town along coast of the Sea of Galilee, comes very early to the tomb to mourn. Finding the stone rolled away from the entrance, she runs to find Peter and "the other disciple," who is probably the writer John, himself. She believes someone has stolen Jesus' body. They race back to the tomb. Peter barges right in and finds something odd. The body is missing alright, but the grave clothes are still there, which is very strange if someone stole the body. And the clothes aren't scattered around, but arranged as if the body had simply passed through them! This is confusing for Peter, to say the least!

John also looks inside the tomb and he believes, but we're not sure what he believes as neither he nor Peter understand the full implications of

this. They return home, leaving the weeping Mary to fend for herself. Not the most sensitive guys in the world! The story continues.

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. (John 20:11-18)

Women were the last at the cross and the first at the tomb. John focuses on one of them, Mary. The angels show a little more compassion to her than Peter and John, asking her why she is crying. She again

explains her dilemma. Then she sees Jesus, but doesn't recognize him. This seems odd, doesn't it, for she clearly knew him well. But, the text tells us it was very early, still dark, her eyes were clouded by tears, and Jesus was the last person she expected to see standing there in that garden of death. He calls her by name, "Mary!" and she immediately knows who he is, her Teacher. She grabs on to him in joyous relief. He tells her that she must let go, because he has things to do, and she has a mission, too. She is to go to the disciples, who Jesus still generously calls "his brothers," even after they had abandoned him when he was arrested. She must tell them the good news. She does exactly that, saying, "I have seen the Lord!" She is the first person to testify to the good news that Jesus is alive.

Last Sunday we read the story of Jesus' horrible death on a Roman cross, noting how even there Jesus is portrayed as a king, although a humiliated, suffering king. And at the same time he is seen as a sacrificial lamb, who is taking away the sins of the world. If there had been no resurrection, those claims that Jesus is a king and that he took away our sins would be just that- claims. But the resurrection serves as God's stamp of approval on those claims, a demonstration that God's power was and is able to defeat the power of sin and death through Jesus Christ. And, that one day Jesus will reign over the earth with justice for all people- "King of

kings and Lord of lords” in the words of Handel’s “Messiah.” For the world, and for you and me, that’s the good news of the resurrection!

But, as the New Testament writers go on to explain, sin and death will continue to hold sway on this earth until Jesus comes again. Because we were created for more than this, and parts of us long for a better world, we are often surprised by pain and loss and grief and corporate greed, and dishonest politicians, and illness and broken relationships and difficult children and disappointing careers and retirements. Just this week we watched as an 18 year-old young woman appeared ready to inflict lethal harm on innocent people in Colorado before taking her own life. We are often surprised that life is this hard, but it is. And it can plunge us into despair if we’re not careful.

Then again, sometimes we are surprised by joy! Like when the power of the resurrection breaks through and we receive a treatment for a serious illness that works, or a job that is a perfect fit with our abilities, or a marriage that weathers the storms of life, or victory over an addiction, or a new love late in life, or a church that helps us become better people- we are surprised by joy!

A few years ago, I was told that I had cancer. I went home, reeling from this news and playing out all kinds of scenarios in my mind. Then

they called back to say there must have been a mistake, because they could no longer find any cancer cells on the slides, and I didn't have cancer after all! I was surprised by joy. All these serendipities are signs that death and evil does not hold total sway over us, but that God is active in our world and working toward a future when sin and death will disappear. They are reflections of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, signs of hope that give us courage to continue to live as people of God in a fallen world.

And the good news is that you don't have to be perfect to encounter the risen Jesus and be surprised by his joy. Think about the people involved in that first Easter morning. There was Peter, who recently had denied he even knew Jesus and ran away from him in his greatest hour of need. He sees the empty tomb, but doesn't understand what he is seeing, so he just goes home. So does John, who we're told does believe! Mary Magdalene mistakes Jesus for a gardener, and then hugs him so tightly that Jesus practically needs to pry himself away. Later the same day, another disciple, Thomas, after hearing the testimony from the others who had seen Jesus, states that he'll never believe Jesus is alive unless he can physically touch his wounds! This is not a stellar crew of faithful followers, is it? And yet, Jesus welcomed each one as part of his team.

That means that you don't need to be perfect if you want to encounter Jesus, either! That no matter what you've done or failed to do, and no

matter where you've been, the risen Christ, who is still alive this day, will welcome you to be part of his team. He will forgive your sins and put you to work helping to transform this world into the kind of place it was created to be.

I grew up singing the old gospel song, "Just As I Am" in church. It seemed to have a hundred verses, and we sang it so often that I got very tired of it. But its basic message is spot on. We can come to Jesus just as we are, assured that he will not turn us away, but will welcome us. And his Spirit will live with us, assuring and comforting and fortifying us to do his work each day. Jesus said, "*Come unto me, all who are weary and weighed down, and I will give you rest.*" (Matt. 11:28)

Perhaps this is your day to come to Jesus in faith just as you are, trusting that he will receive you warmly, forgive your sins, and work with you to help you become the person you were created to be. Why not talk with him and be surprised by joy?