

“A Surprise Visit”

John 20:19-23

May 5, 2019

When I was a child, we lived in Northern Virginia, which in the days before I270 and I70, was about a two-and half-hour drive from Hagerstown, Md., where both sets of my grandparents lived. The drive with three young children was challenging for my parents, so we didn't go up very often. However, one time we decided on the spur of the moment to go up and surprise them. I was probably six years old. We parked down the street and my dad had me go up to the door of my grandparent's house and knock as the rest of the family hid. I still remember the confused and then joyful look on my grandmother Wright's face as she realized that our family had come for a surprise visit. We had a lot of fun that day!

As we continue in John's gospel we come to a story about a surprise visit. It takes place on Easter Sunday evening. Listen to what happened:

¹⁹When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you."²⁰After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.²¹ Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."²²When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.²³If

you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:19-23)

There's a lot packed into these few verses, so let's take a closer look while also looking for what this story may tell us about our own surprise visits from the Lord! First, notice how the visit changed their hearts. We're told in verse 19 that the disciples were afraid. That makes sense, because Jesus had been executed just a couple days before, and who knew what the authorities wanted to do with his followers. The women reported that morning that his tomb was empty, which was confirmed by Peter and John. And one of the women, Mary Magdalene, reported seeing Jesus alive, but no one was sure what to make of all that.

They are hiding behind locked doors, afraid, when Jesus shows up. We're not sure how he got in; Perhaps his resurrected body could do new things. But there he was. He gives them the gift of peace, which they surely needed! And then we're told, they were filled with joy! That's a significant change in heart- from fear and confusion to peace and joy. A change in heart is often one of the marks of a genuine encounter with the Lord.

Another common element of these encounters comes when Jesus gives them a mission and equips them to carry it out. What he says is remarkable, "*As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*" (John 20:21)

Wait! What? Jesus has made it very clear in John's gospel that the Father sent him into the world to represent the Father and do his will in the world, no matter the cost. "In the same way," Jesus says, "I am sending you into the world to represent me and do my work in the world, no matter the cost." He had already spent a lot of time teaching and showing them what that work involved- healing, embracing the outcast, ministering to the poor, standing up for those treated unjustly, confronting religious hypocrisy, and announcing the Good News of God's love and forgiveness. These disciples- the same people that ran away just a few days earlier when Jesus needed them most- are to be his representatives on earth, carrying on the work he began. But they really don't appear to be up to the task, do they? How on earth are they going to do this?

Verse 22 tells us: ²²*When (Jesus) had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit."* (John 20:22) Jesus had promised them that he would send them his Spirit back in chapter 14. He said, ²⁵*"I have said these things to you while I am still with you. ²⁶But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.* (John 14:25-26) Here, he fulfills that promise. And notice how Jesus conveys the Holy Spirit to them. He breathes on them. This action recalls the action of God back in Genesis 2 when God breathed life into the first man, Adam. Jesus

is breathing new life into these disciples, and they will need this new life to fulfill their mission!

The passage ends with a somewhat confusing illustration of their mission in verse 23. ²³*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.*” (John 20:23) Theologians have wrestled with meaning of these words from earliest times. From everything we learn elsewhere in Scripture, no human being has the authority or power to forgive sins, so a literal understanding of this verse is unlikely. What most Bible scholars have concluded is that the disciples (and we) are to announce that the forgiveness of God is available to all who will receive God’s grace, as is the judgment of God to those who refuse God’s grace. I think that’s probably the best way to understand this verse.

As I was reflecting on this passage, I thought back to Andy Miner’s sermon last week about two encounters with God in the Old Testament- the boy Samuel in the house of the Lord, and Elijah, hiding in a cave. These encounters were both genuine, but very different from one another- one quiet & gentle, the other frighteningly powerful; one seemingly out of nowhere, the other as a response to Elijah’s fear for his life; one to a young boy, the other to an old man. How about our own encounters with God? We don’t talk about them very much, but as I speak to people, sometimes they’ll tell me about personal encounters with God they have had. These

encounters come in all shapes and sizes! And I've had a couple myself. Now I don't think everyone needs to have such encounters, but we can give thanks when they happen.

The first encounter I remember happened many years ago when I was a youth director at Vienna Presbyterian Church in Northern Va. I was sitting in worship one Sunday morning and we began to sing "Let All Mortal Flesh Keep Silence." It's probably the oldest hymn in our hymnal, dating from the liturgy of St. James in the 4th century. I had frankly never given it a thought. But while we were singing it, I was overwhelmed with a sense of God's presence. I tried to keep on singing, but I couldn't get the words out, as tears streamed down my face. The words of the song, describing the coming of Jesus into our world that first Christmas, touched me deeply, as did the haunting melody.

*"Rank on rank the host of heaven
spreads its vanguard on the way,
as the light of light descendeth
from the realms of endless day,
that the powers of hell may vanish
as the darkness clears away."*

This surprise visit gave me a sense of peace and wonder that I had been given the honor of sharing the Good News of Jesus' coming into our world with our youth.

I think I've told you before about my second encounter with Jesus. It took place in a tiny village called Ekbalam in Mexico's Yucatan peninsula. The village was so poor they had no electricity or running water, and even lacked an outhouse! They were embarrassed by their poverty and so they had arranged for us to stay in a nearby village from where we rode in the back of a chicken truck for 7 miles each morning down the dirt road to Ekbalam. Our project there was putting a concrete roof on their first sanctuary. A group of our young people and a couple adults spent long, hot days doing that heavy labor along with our Mexican hosts, and we were exhausted when we sat down under that still-curing roof to dedicate the sanctuary our final night.

As we sat there sweating on rough benches while chickens and dogs ran in and out of the church, the pastor told the story of how this small congregation had been praying for five years for someone to come and help them finish their sanctuary, and that we were the answer to their prayers. That just about knocked me over! Here I thought we were there because I had done a lot of careful investigation and planning for this, our first mission trip to Mexico as an extension of our youth ministry. But I

came to see that the real reason we were there was because a small bunch of dirt-poor Mexican Christians in the middle of nowhere had prayed, and God sent us as an answer to their prayers. That was a truly humbling experience, and it impressed on me a call to Christian missions that I have tried to fulfil in a variety of ways in a variety of churches. Encounters with Jesus often give us a sense of mission.

The final observation I have about encounters with Jesus is that they happen according to God's time and plan, not ours. The disciples saw Jesus on Easter evening. They wouldn't see him again until a week later. And then once more by the Sea of Galilee. Each time, he came when he chose to, and each time he was preparing them for life without his physical presence, for life guided by his Spirit.

Our own encounters with God also happen when God decides they should happen. For some of us, that may be never! For others of us, more frequently, but God is in control of these surprise visits, not us. In fact, pursuing repeat visits can distract us from carrying out the work to which Jesus has called us. The visits aren't rewards for being good, but are rather gifts of grace to assure, comfort, and challenge us to do God's work on earth. Have you had an encounter with the Lord? I'd like to hear about it!