

Surprise? Surprise!
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 First Presbyterian Church, New Bern
 March 31, 2024 – Easter!

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 round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?” 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.

I find few things as comforting as the first words of Easter text from the Gospel of John.

Maybe you do too.

“While it was still dark.”

In other words, before they could really see.

Before it was clear.

Before they had it figured out.

That's when they go to the tomb. Not when they have all of the pieces of the puzzle in place, but before they are put together.

When I was younger, I thought I would have it all figured out when I became an adult. Truth be told, I still don't have it all figured out.

Before I became a parent, I thought I knew way more than I did about how to be a good mom. Truth be told, I think I know less now than I did then, and I've been doing it for almost 21 years.

I still have existential angst over death, worry about those I love even though I know we all rest in God's arms.

My faith still features doubts and I am way more a work-in-progress than I would like to be, than I care to admit.

In other words, these words "while it was still dark" are for me. Maybe they are for you, too.

As Zach Bryan sings, "Come as you are, however broken, come as you are, and we will see if we can make you whole again."¹

Where does Mary show up? At the tomb, the last place she had seen Jesus. Seen his body. She shows up there not once, but twice. Mary goes back with Peter and the disciples Jesus loved. Maybe Lazarus. Maybe John.

They see that the tomb is empty. They believe that Jesus' body is gone, but John makes clear they still have not grasped resurrection. They are still in the dark. They leave.

Mary does not leave. She stays. She grieves. And that is when she sees Jesus. Meets Jesus. Her seeing is more than what her eyes take in, it is perceiving - once Jesus calls her name, not only does she see, she knows. She understands. And then she goes to tell - or announce as we have it in scripture. It is more than a report, it is a witness. It is proclamation. Jesus has not left. Jesus is not gone.

Should it have been such a surprise? After all, Jesus had been telling them this would happen. Maybe it should not have been a surprise, but it was.

The thing is, Mary was open to the surprise. Open to the news. Open to Jesus.

¹ <https://youtu.be/8yps79eMhcv?feature=shared> Make no mistake- I don't think that Zach Bryan is writing about church, here, but I do think that the sentiment "Come as you are" is one we can import. If you listen to this, know it has some adult language.

Easter is the reminder that Jesus can still surprise us, if we let him.

How do we open ourselves to Jesus? It starts by showing up. By setting our sights on going to the tomb.

Setting our sights, setting our intention, so everything else takes us there.

When I moved to Preston County, West Virginia, one of the northernmost counties of West Virginia, in the late 1990s, I had lots to learn. Not only about being a pastor, but also about living in a place that received an average of about 6' of snow per year.

I'd grown up in South Carolina, a place where you could use water as your windshield wiper fluid and not have any issues, because it never got that cold.

In Preston County, I had to learn how to drive in the snow.

I had a lot to learn. I don't think I'll ever forget that first time navigating a snowy, icy back road in my four-wheel drive Ford with a drop off on one side and a cliff on the other and feeling my wheels slide rather than grip. That feeling of utter powerlessness as nothing worked the way that I thought it would, the way that I thought it should. And my complete relief when the car finally navigated itself, front bumper first, firmly into the cliff side of the road.

Only I didn't know how I was going to get it unattached from that cliff.

In true West Virginia fashion, it didn't take long for a car to appear. A vintage Chevy Chevette soon came up the hillside. Two wheel drive. Bald tires. And out jumped five or six people in short sleeves ready to help push my car out of the cliff and send me on my way.

When I arrived at my destination and told some church members what had happened, they promptly set out to teach me how to drive in the snow, and I learned the most important lesson of that art. Something many of you might already know. It starts by setting your eyes on where you want to go, and everything else will follow that.

That's what Mary is teaching us, too. If you want to find Jesus, set your eyes on the empty tomb.

If you want to meet Jesus, set your eyes on the places he would be. Where there are hungry people, hurting people. Where there is injustice or people who need to hear that they are God's beloved child, made wonderfully and fearfully.

If we want Jesus to surprise us, and I believe he both still can and does, it happens when we set our eyes on the empty tomb, and show up willing to be surprised, willing to learn, willing to change, willing to live as Jesus lived and, maybe more importantly, love as Jesus loved.

Not because resurrection fixes everything, but because it reminds us that Jesus never leaves us. Jesus returns to us in all times, joyful and despairing.²

And too many times we stop ourselves before we even start, saying the words but setting our eyes in another direction. Discounting the power of giving. Worship. Forgiveness. Grace. Thinking that there is no way we can feed everyone or accepting that we need to accept some level of war or violence are a reality. We think that we are less than God's beloved children, or that someone else is less because they are different. We let our eyes drift away from Jesus, and we fall away from God's path.

Setting our eyes on the empty tomb and the risen Christ, well, That's Easter. It's living as Resurrection people.

It's so much more than the power of positive thinking or faking it until you make it, it's recognizing that it's not all on our shoulders. We can't do it on our own, it's reflecting, sharing, channeling the love of God that does it.

Easter. For those who believe. Those who doubt. Those who wonder. And those who wander.

As poet Christian Wiman proclaims:

Christ is not alive now because he rose from the dead two thousand years ago. He rose from the dead two thousand years ago because he is alive right now.

May this be an Easter where our eyes turn towards the Empty tomb.

The place where we meet Jesus and find that we can still be
surprised by Joy
surprised by Hope
surprised by Peace
surprised by Justice
surprised by Love.

Because as I've said before, today is not the last day of the week, it is the first, and Jesus is both here and on the loose, calling us to a new life. Let us set our sights on Jesus. 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. Alleluia! Amen.

² I had a similar idea in the sermon by the Rev. Anne Russ shared a newsletter article this morning that had the language of "fixing" that I liked better, so this is her language.
<https://resources.doubtingbeliever.com/newsletters/eyJfcmFpbHMiOmsibWVzc2FnZSI6Ik1UZzRORFkyTVE9PSIsImV4cC16bnVsbCwicHVyIjoibmV3c2xldHRlciJ9fQ==--1c920f6f19c3937b8eb9633993ed358095b94cc42feb896a8f42c20199cfd7d2/preview?untrackable=true>