

SURPRISED BY JESUS **(John 20:19-23)**

When was the last time you were surprised in a good way? Let me tell you about a time I was surprised. It wasn't the last time, but it was a memorable one. In fact, I still remember the date. It was July 25, 2004. I know the date because it was the day I turned 40. It happened to be a Sunday.

I had already delivered my sermon to the church I was serving in Stillwater, and I was standing in the front, off the platform, making announcements, just like I do here at the end of a worship service.

The worship center was rather spacious. Behind me and to my right was the piano side, where there were two swinging doors. Behind me to my left was the organ side, where there was another set of swinging doors.

As I was making those announcements, I heard a large sound behind me and to my left. I turned in time to see my daughter coming through those doors pushing a wheelchair. She came up to me and instructed me to sit down, which I did, and she wheeled me up the aisle to the back where people could file by and express their condolences.

Just a few years ago. It may have been 2019, the church had a surprise birthday dinner for me on a Sunday after the morning worship service. I was surprised to see several of my family here including my mom, my sister, one of my brothers, and daughter. Ruth Ann and some of you pulled that off.

There is a certain joy in being surprised if it is a good surprise. There are all kinds of good surprises—an unexpected check shows up in the mail; you get the announcement that there is going to be an addition to your family, your team makes the playoffs.

Good surprises are not confined to the thoughtful deeds of others or to simply fortuitous circumstances. Sometimes it is God who surprises us. He shows up when least expected.

That was the case the first Easter. Mary Magdalene and the other women had gone to the tomb early on Easter morning, but they did not go in search of the person of Jesus; they went in search of the body of Jesus. When they arrived, they discovered that Jesus' body was missing. When Mary came face-to-face with Jesus, she did not recognize Him. She mistook Him for the gardener because she wasn't looking for a resurrected Christ. She was looking for a corpse.

In Luke 24, Jesus walked with two disciples to the town of Emmaus. Neither of these two were among the apostolic band, but they had been followers of Christ. Jesus conversed with them all along the way; yet, they did not recognize Him. A key reason they did not catch who He was is that they weren't looking for Him. They didn't find Jesus, but Jesus found them. He surprised them.

In today's text, we are going to look at what happened on that first Easter evening. Let's look at John 20:19-23. Jesus' disciples knew that His body was missing from the tomb. They had heard reports from the women that they had seen and spoken to Jesus, but they were rather skeptical of what they had been told. Ten of the original twelve

disciples were present. By this time, Judas, who betrayed Jesus, had hung himself. For whatever reason, Thomas was absent. Those ten disciples weren't looking for Jesus on Easter Sunday evening, but He showed up. He found them. Jesus surprised them.

Jesus just may surprise you in one of three ways.

Jesus Surprises Us by Finding Us in Our Fear and Grief

Look again at v.19. Their leader had already been arrested and crucified because of the hatred and jealousy of the Jewish leaders. The disciples wonder if they are going to be next. Will they be singled out because of their devotion to and association with Jesus? Regardless of whether the disciples would be taken into custody by the authorities, it is apparent that two other things—fear and grief—had already arrested them. Fear and grief were holding them in bondage—fear over what might happen, grief over what had happened.

Could it be that you are held captive by fear and/or grief? Have you shut yourself off from the world and even from those who love you because you are afraid of what the future holds or because of what the past held?

We have good news to celebrate this morning. The good news is that Jesus is the risen Christ. He is the God who surprises us, and when He finds us, He frees us from the fear that binds us and from the grief that imprisons us.

Jesus has a history both of surprising and freeing people in the midst of their fear and grief. After Jesus fed the 5000, He instructed His disciples to get into a boat and sail to the other side of the Sea of Galilee while He went up onto a mountainside and prayed. While He was praying, a fierce storm arose. The disciples battled the wind and the waves for hours making little headway. Suddenly, they caught sight of a figure approaching them in the wee hours of morning while it was still dark and they were far from land. First, they were afraid of the storm. Now, they are afraid of what they think is a ghost. Next, they hear a familiar voice that calls out to them, “Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid.”

When life catches you in a tempest, when the billows begin to roll, and you are fearful that your ship will go down and you with it, look up. You may discover that Jesus has found you. Listen up. You may hear Him call out to you, “Take courage. It is I. Do not be afraid” (Matthew 14:27). Jesus is far more powerful than our fear.

Jesus is also mightier than our grief. Jesus found Martha and Mary after their brother Lazarus was four-days dead. He spoke with them. He cried with them. But He also assured them with the words: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me will live, even though He dies” (John 11:25). He then authenticated His claim by raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus provided even better proof of His power when He rose from the dead.

Death will not have the last word, nor will our grief.

Have you been grieving lately? What loss have you experienced recently? Have you lost a loved one . . . a friend, a chance, an opportunity, a job, a hope, a dream? Jesus will find you. He will speak with you. He may even weep with you. Make no mistake. He will

assure you that He is greater than your grief.

The risen Jesus surprises us by finding us in our fear and grief.

Jesus Surprises Us by Gifting Us with Timely Blessings

When Jesus showed up and appeared before His fearful followers, He arrived with some gifts to share. They were timely gifts because they were the very things the disciples needed at that moment. Look at vv. 19-20. Those verses mention two gifts that Jesus gave to His disciples—peace and joy. He gave them peace to combat their fear and joy to conquer their grief. Both gifts were possible because of Jesus' presence.

It is Jesus' presence in our lives that bequeaths to us peace and joy. When Jesus is absent there is fear and sorrow. When He is present there is peace and joy. During the most difficult times of your life, the times that you felt the most fearful and the most sorrowful, you wondered where Jesus was. In fact, you may have prayed, "God, where are You? I can't see You. I can't hear You. I can't find You."

Just remember, when you can't see God, He can still see You. When you can't hear God, He can still hear you. When you can't find God, He still knows right where You are. In time, He will reveal Himself to You. He may not give you answers, but He will give you something better. He will give you His peace and His joy. Both are products of His presence.

Jesus knew He couldn't stay with His disciples physically forever. Knowing that, He gave them another gift. Look at v. 22. I view this verse as a promised gift. The words "on them" are not found in the text. There is no evidence that the disciples received the gift of God's Spirit on that very occasion. We do know that 50 days later, on the Day of Pentecost, the disciples did receive the Spirit whom Jesus had promised would come. Luke tells us in Acts 1-2 about the coming of the Holy Spirit to the Church. He came not merely to be with us but to be in us. It is because God's Spirit lives within us that we can know the Lord's presence, His peace, His joy, and His power. As we will see in a few moments, we need the power of the Holy Spirit for the mission God has given the church.

Before we proceed to that, I want to say that it occurs to me that for a gift to be received the giver must have the attention of the recipient. If I am going to give you a gift, I must have your attention. I'm not going to simply leave a gift on your doorstep and hope that you find it. In order for you to reach out your hands and receive the gift, I must have your attention.

How does God get our attention?

Some years ago Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, was quoted in *Time* magazine as saying that he didn't think going to church on Sunday was a good use of his time. That comment prompted the author Garrison Keillor to ponder what God would have to do to get Bill Gates' attention. Keillor wrote the following parable:

Bill Gates was the richest person in America, and after he gained a good deal of the world's resources, God sent Gates an e-mail: "Bill, I saw how you allocated your time last Sunday morning, and frankly, I was unimpressed. Riding a

stationary bike while watching people on the Men's Channel talk about triglycerides and PSA counts isn't very satisfying. Bill, let me give you three words of advice: 'Love your neighbor.' Ever hear what happened to the rich man who stiff-armed the beggar Lazarus? It caused a general protection fault, and he's been offline for centuries. If there's anything you'd like to talk about, I'm here. Your Creator, God."

Gates typed back a reply: "Dear God, Wow! Omniscience—cool. But how do I know that you're omnipotent too? Gates."

The moment that Gates clicked on "send," the entire Microsoft campus in Redding, Washington, went into a great darkness. The air conditioning system shuttered to a halt. Gates' office was filled with creeping things and birds of the air. His websites were burning after a multitude of hits by Hittites. A herd of crazed swine trotted down the hall by his office, their little pink eyes aglow. Out in the hall a beggar began begging for alms. When Gates gave him a nickel, the power went back on.

Back in his office, Gates found a message on his computer screen, which said, "Hey, Bill, that was only the screen saver. There's more where that came from. Obey my commandments or the information age could come to a halt through a virus in the system. I did a flood once, and behold, I can do viruses. Once people tried to reach heaven by building a tower, so I made their formats incompatible. I can do this again. P.S.: Gates, it's your move."

When I prepare a sermon, I will read the text in several translations, read what the commentaries say about the passage, read sermons to see what other preachers have said, and since I have been doing this awhile, I will look to see what I have said. I found a sermon I preached on this passage 20 years ago. It was on Easter Sunday of 2003. The following words are the very words I spoke two decades ago. To me they almost sound prophetic. Here is what I said: "God could get our attention through a flood, or a virus, or a downturn in the economy, or a war, but the way that He got the attention of the disciples was that He found them. He showed up alive in their midst after He was dead and buried. Once He had their attention he shared some gifts that they needed and that He wanted them to have."

So, let me ask you, does the Lord have your attention? If He doesn't, what is it going to take for Him to get it or for you to give it?

So far, we've discovered that the risen Christ surprises us in our fear and grief. Then, He gifts us with timely gifts.

Jesus Surprises Us by Sending Us on Mission for Him

Look at v. 21. The Father had a job for Jesus to do. Now Jesus has a job for us to do. Jesus' job was to give His life as a payment for sin. Our job is to go into the entire world and to make known the gospel—the good news that Jesus saves. Jesus has sent us, and He equipped us by giving us His Spirit. We have the message, and we have the power of

His Spirit. God's Spirit will guide us and enable us to get the message out to a world that needs to hear.

Are you willing to go, and are you willing to share?

Many of us have been hesitant to share the message of Christ. Listen to a story told by John Powell, a university professor. It is a story about a former student of his named Tommy.

Some years ago, I stood watching my university students file into the classroom for the opening session in my "Theology of Faith" class. That was the first day I saw Tommy. He was combing his long hair, which hung six inches below his shoulders.

Tommy turned out to be the atheist-in-residence in my course. He constantly objected to or smirked at the possibility of an unconditionally loving God. We lived in relative peace for one semester, although at times he was a pain in the back pew. At the end of the course when he turned in his final exam, he asked in a slightly cynical tone, "Do you ever think I'll find God?"

I decided on a little shock therapy. "No!" I said emphatically.

"Oh," he responded. "I thought that was the product you were pushing."

I let him get five steps from the door, then called out, "Tommy! I don't think you'll ever find Him, but I am certain that He will find you!" Tommy just shrugged and left.

Later I heard that Tom had graduated and I was duly grateful. Then came a sad report: Tommy had terminal cancer. Before I could search him out, he came to me. When he walked into my office, his body was badly wasted, and his long hair had fallen out because of chemotherapy. But his eyes were bright and his voice was firm for the first time in a long time.

"Tommy, I've thought about you so often. I hear you are sick," I blurted out.

"Oh yes, very sick. I have cancer. It's a matter of weeks."

"Can you talk about it?"

"Sure, what would you like to know?"

"What's it like to be 24 and know you are dying?"

"Well, it could be worse!"

"Like what?"

"Well, like being 50 and having no values or ideals. Like being 50 and thinking that booze, seducing women and making money are the real biggies in life.

"But what I really came to see you about is something you said to me on the last day of class. I asked if you ever thought I would find God and you said no, which surprised me. Then you said, 'But He will find you.' I thought about that a lot, even though my search was hardly intense at that time. But when the doctors removed a lump from my groin and told me it was malignant, I got serious about locating God. And when the malignancy spread to my vital organs, I really began banging against the doors of heaven. But nothing happened. Well, one day I woke up, and instead of throwing a few more futile appeals to a God who may or may

not exist, I just quit. I decided I didn't care about God and the afterlife or anything else for that matter.

"I decided to spend what time I had left doing something more profitable. I thought about you and something you had said in one of your lectures: 'The essential sadness is to go through life without loving.' But it would be equally sad to leave this world without telling those you love that you have loved them. So, I began with the hardest one: my dad.

"He was reading the paper when I approached him. 'Dad, I would like to talk to you.'

"Well, talk,' he replied.

"I mean, it's really important, Dad.' The newspaper came down three slow inches.

"What is it?' he asked.

"Dad, I love you. I just wanted you to know that.' Tom continued, 'The newspaper fluttered to the floor. Then my father did two things I couldn't remember him doing before. He cried and he hugged me. And we talked all night even though he had to go to work the next day.

"It was easier with my mom and little brother. They cried with me, too, and we hugged each other and shared things we had been keeping secret for so many years. I was only sorry that I had waited so long. Here I was, in the shadow of death, and I was just beginning to open up to all the people I had actually been close to.

"Then one day I turned around, and God was there. He didn't come to me when I pleaded with Him. Apparently, God does things His own way at His own hour. The important thing is you were right. He found me even after I stopped looking for Him."

"Tommy, I think you're saying something much more universal than you realize. You are saying that the surest way of finding God is not to make Him a private possession or an instant consolation in time of need, but rather by opening up to love.

"Tom, could I ask you a favor? Would you come to my 'Theology of Faith' class and tell my students what you just told me?" Though we scheduled a date, he never made it. Before Tom died, we talked one last time. "I'm not going to make it to your class," he said.

"I know, Tom."

"Will you tell them for me? Will you tell . . . the whole world for me?"

"I will, Tom. I will tell them."

Someone more important than Tom has asked us to go tell the world for Him. His name is Jesus. He has found us, and now He wants us to join Him in finding others. He is sending; will you go?