

Easter Day 2015

Text: John 20:1-18

Theme: "The Surprise Party!"

Surprise parties. They're mighty difficult to pull off successfully. They require diplomacy, secrecy, planning. But when they work – hey – they're really worth it. You see the jaw drop and the eyes widen. You see the absolute look of amazement. And you sense a genuine gratitude.

Surprise parties. Yes, they're great. But a party was the last thing on Mary's mind when she approached the tomb on that Easter Sunday morning. The last few days had brought nothing to celebrate. The Jews could celebrate – Jesus was out of the way. The soldiers could celebrate – their work was done. But Mary couldn't celebrate. To her, the last few days had brought nothing but tragedy.

Mary had been there. She had heard the leaders clamour for Jesus' blood. She had witnessed the Roman whip rip the skin off his back. She had winced as the thorns sliced his brow. And she had wept at the weight of the cross.

In the Louvre there is a painting of the scene of the cross. In the painting the stars are dead and the world is wrapped in darkness. In the shadows there is this kneeling figure. It is Mary. She is holding her hands and lips against the bleeding feet of Jesus.

We don't know if Mary did that. But we know she could have. She was there. She was there to hold her arm around the shoulder of Jesus' mother. She was there to close Jesus' eyes. She was there. So it's not surprising that she wants to be there again.

In the early morning mist she arises from her bed, takes her spices and aloes, and leaves her house. She anticipates a sombre task. By now, the body will be swollen. His face will be white. Death's odour will be pungent.

A grey sky gives way to gold as she walks up the narrow path. As she rounds the final bend, she gasps. The rock in front of the grave is pushed back. "*Someone has taken the body*", she exclaims.

She runs to awaken Peter and John. They rush to see for themselves. She tries to keep up with them, but can't. Peter comes out of the tomb bewildered and John comes out believing. But Mary just sits in front of it weeping. The two men go home and leave her alone with her grief.

But something tells her that she is not alone. Maybe she hears a noise. Maybe she hears a whisper. Or maybe she just hears her own heart tell her to take a look for herself. Whatever the reason, she does. She stoops down, sticks her head into the entrance of the tomb, and waits for her eyes to adjust to the dark. She hears a voice; "*why are you crying?*" She sees what looks to be a man, but he's white. Dazzling white. He is one of two lights at either end of the slab – two candles blazing by the altar.

*“Why are you crying?”* This time the question is asked by another, by someone outside the tomb. *“Why are you crying?”* An unusual question to be asked in a cemetery. In fact, the question is rude – that is – unless the questioner knows something that Mary doesn’t know. *“They have taken my Lord away, and I don’t know where they have put him”*, Mary responds. She still calls him *“my Lord”*. As far as she knows, his corpse had been carted off by grave robbers. But in spite of it all, he is still her Lord.

Such devotion moves this figure who’d asked her the question. It moves him closer to her. So close she hears him breathing. She turns and there he stands. She thinks he is the gardener.

Now Jesus could have revealed himself right there and then. He could have called for an angel to introduce him. He could have organized a band to play a fanfare. But he didn’t. He simply asks; *“who is it you are looking for?”* He doesn’t leave her wondering long, though. Just long enough to remind us that he loves to surprise us. He waits for us to despair of human strength and then he intervenes with heavenly strength. God waits for us to give up and then . . . surprise!!

Over the years – as a pastor – I’ve dealt with lots of despair in the lives of people. What do you say to someone who says to you, “my doctor says that the baby I’m carrying has serious genetic abnormalities. It won’t survive 3 months after birth. He recommends an immediate abortion.”? What do you say when a 14 year-old girl says to you, “my father is sexually abusing me. He denies it, and mum believes him.”? What do you say when a husband – with tears streaming down his face – says, “my wife is having an affair, and she isn’t prepared to stop.”?

What do you say when people share their despair, their shattered dreams, the problems that drag them down? There are no easy answers that you or I can give to magically make things better. But gently I remind these struggling people that God is at his best when our life is at its worst. God has a tendency – I remind them – God has a tendency to create some amazing surprises.

Want some examples? Listen to these surprises from God. Hear the rocks meant for the body of an adulteress woman drop to the ground! Listen as Jesus invites a death row convict to ride with him into the kingdom! Listen as Jesus stands in a boat and commands winds and waves . . . and they obey! Listen to the widow from Nain eating dinner with her son who is supposed to be dead! And listen . . . listen to the surprise as a woman’s name is spoken by a man she loved – a man she had buried. *“Mary”*, he said.

Yes, God appearing in the strangest places doing the strangest things. Stretching smiles where there had hung only frowns! Placing twinkles where there were only tears! Hanging a bright star in the sky where there was only darkness! Calling names in a cemetery!

*“Mary”*, he said softly, “surprise!” Mary was shocked! It’s not often you hear your name spoken by an eternal tongue. But when she did, she recognised it. When she did, she responded as only those who have been touched by Jesus do. She worshipped him!

Like Mary - you and I - we stand before the empty tomb today. And maybe we stand here in peace and contentment because life is going swimmingly. But chances are – some of us – like Mary – are struggling, downcast, drowning. And if we're not now, we will. All of us will at some time. And today – when we find ourself in that place – we will hear a voice; *“why are you crying?”* And we'll be able to articulate our struggle, our challenge, our heartbreak. And then we'll hear another question; *“who is it you are looking for?”* What a question! If you're looking for someone to snap his fingers and make all your pain disappear, you'll be disappointed. If you're looking for someone to say just the words you want to hear, to give you just what you want, you'll be disillusioned. If you're looking for someone to fix everyone else around you but leave you “as is”, you'll be disenchanting. But if you are looking for a Saviour, if you are looking for the one who conquered death and who offers you life, if you're looking for the one who can transform you and the way you approach the struggles and challenges of life, be prepared for a surprise! Because you'll hear a word. One single word. Spoken by the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. You'll hear your name. “Mary”. “Simon”. “Pauline”. Whatever your name is, you'll hear him speak it. And hearing your name – you knowing the Saviour and him knowing you – that will make all the difference!

This scene, this first Easter morning scene – it has all the elements of a surprise party: secrecy, wide-eyes, amazement, gratitude. But you know what? This celebration is minor in comparison with one that is being planned for the future. It will be similar to Mary's, but it will be a whole lot bigger. Many more graves will open. Many more names will be called. Many more knees will bow. And many more lost people will find home.

Will you be one of them?