

### A Day of Stunning Surprises

Where we left off last week, which was Easter, depends on the passage. The one from the Gospel of Mark left us with the three women fleeing from the empty tomb, “for terror and amazement had seized them.” No Resurrection appearances by the Risen Christ, just three women trying to figure out what to do next.

But if we’re talking the passage from John, which we read at the Sunrise Service, that passage ended with Jesus appearing to Mary, and then Mary announcing to the disciples, undoubtedly with tears and screams of joy, “I have seen the Lord.” To call that a “stunning surprise” would be an understatement. “Bombshell” would be more like it.

The next five verses, which we just heard, contain at least five more “stunning surprises” or bombshells.

The first one is John’s statement in verse 31: “Jesus came and stood among them.” John seems to tell that part of the story so matter-of-factly, almost as if it was no big deal. [In a bored voice] “Jesus came and stood among them . . . okay, so, what happened next? (And could you pass me my Easter basket? I haven’t had enough sugar today.)” But let us not forget the context. It was the third day that the disciples’ Lord and Master had been dead and buried in a tomb. They were undoubtedly still in shock . . . and in a state of deep, deep grief. As if all their hopes and dreams and reasons for living had been cruelly stripped away.

John tells us that “it was evening on that day.” Evening is a time of twilight, of beautiful sunset skies. But it is also a time of deepening darkness—a time, in part, of having to face whatever hard facts that the day had left us with. Not knowing what tomorrow will bring. And sometimes, on our worst days, evenings are a time when we must face the inescapable truth that we simply, truly, don’t have much hope. (Some of you may have had evenings like that recently, with your various health crises.)

John tells us, very specifically, that “the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews.” Again, a simple statement that is easy to take for granted. During the 22 years that Lois and I lived in Wichita, we locked our doors every time we left the house. No big deal. But let’s assume that the disciples never locked their doors. There was never any need to. Until now. Because, not only were they hopeless and full of deep grief, they were afraid. Afraid of what might happen. Afraid that things could get even worse. Afraid that they were going to end up with their hands and feet nailed to a Roman cross, and left there to die a slow, agonizing death.

In the previous verse, Mary had just come to them with her seemingly delirious and utterly unbelievable claim “I have seen the Lord.” Whether or not the disciples believed her, John doesn’t say. And now John says, equally unbelievably, “Jesus came and stood among them.” What, did he just appear out of thin air? Did he come walking through the walls, or the fearfully locked doors? Look at the picture Kara put in the bulletin just below the scripture. It’s pretty, but it’s also really fanciful. Who knows what Jesus really looked like? John doesn’t say he was dressed in white, or even that he had long hair and a beard. That’s the artist’s interpretation. Who knows if they even recognized him at first?

I propose to you that this is precisely how Jesus, the Risen Christ, comes to us sometimes. That he just [snap fingers] comes, and stands among us. And we may recognize him immediately. Or we may not realize he was even here until long after the fact.

The second bombshell or stunning surprise is what Jesus says to them. “Peace be with you.” Sure, it may have been simply a common greeting at the time. Like saying “Hey, what’s up!” But he says it to them two times in three verses. As if he knew they didn’t really get what he meant the first time. Peace, people. *Eirene*, in Greek. *Shalom*, in Hebrew. Arguably one of the most important words in the Bible. A state of well-being and restoration. A state in which everything is truly okay, and all is right with the world. And Jesus is giving this to them as a gift.

The Risen Christ is offering us the same state, the same stunning gift. Amidst all of our health crises. Amidst all our frustrating disillusionment. Amidst our struggles and challenges, some of which are too deep or too personal to speak. Amidst all the division and conflict. Both in our world, and in our community. Jesus comes, stands among us, and says *Eirene umin*. Which means literally “Peace to you,” or “Peace be with you.” He may have meant it as an immediate gift, a crucial change of status. He may have meant it as a future promise. Most likely he meant it as both.

The third bombshell is what Jesus says immediately after he offered them the gift of peace the second time. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” [Repeat, more slowly.] Wait, what? If your jaw isn’t on the floor right now, you must not have really heard what he just said. In the very same way that God, the sovereign Creator and Jesus’ loving Father, sent him, the Son of God, into the world, so Jesus is now sending the disciples. And, all of John’s readers. Including us. The Latin word for the Greek and English verb “to send” is *missio*. Jesus is sending his disciples, and us, on a mission. We are to be his special agents, his missionaries. Remember the television show, and subsequent movies, titled “Mission Impossible”: “Your mission Jim, should you decide to accept it . . .” Which is appropriate, because Jesus’ mission to us might feel pretty impossible at times. “Your mission, Tom, and [name], and [name], should you decide to accept it . . .” Our mission might lead to tremendous sacrifice on our part. Even to our own death. Just as it led to Jesus’. But you know what? In the same way, it also will lead to new, Resurrected life for us. Just as it did for Jesus.

The fourth bombshell or stunning surprise is what Jesus does next. He “breathes” on them. And then said, very simply, “receive the Holy Spirit.” Holy Spirit—we’ve heard of that before, right? This is what Bible scholars and seminarians call “the Johannine Pentecost.” Which in Luke-Acts required forty days of waiting, and involved a loud, rushing wind, and tongues of fire, and sudden speaking in languages the disciples didn’t know we knew. But here in the Gospel of John, on the very same day Jesus rose and appeared to his disciples, he breathed on them [exhale].

Can you feel it [exhale]? Filling us with his very own Spirit. Which is also God’s Spirit. It gives us everything we will need to carry out our seemingly impossible mission. Everything we will need to live life the way God wants us to live. Lives that are holy, which literally means set apart for God. We have that Spirit! Inside of us!

The fifth bombshell, the fifth stunning surprise, Jesus saves for last. “If you forgive the sins of any,” he says, “they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” This is one part of God’s own power he’s talking about! God’s own authority! The verbs in these two phrases, “If you forgive” and “if you retain,” are both second person plural. “If you together [gesture] forgive,” and “If you together [gesture] retain.” He’s talking to them as a group. A gathered group of his followers. He’s talking to them as “the Church.” Those missionaries or “special agents” [gesture] he is sending out into the world, just as God sent him. He’s giving to them, and to us, the power and authority of forgiveness. Why would he single that one task out in this way? Couldn’t he have said “love,” or “hospitality,” or any other gift of the Spirit? Could it be that forgiveness is the single most important power and authority we have been given? And we are to use it wisely? Perhaps even generously?

As it happens, the early Anabaptists, our spiritual forebears, placed a lot of emphasis on this verse. They referred to it as “binding and loosing.” Which has become a phrase for holding one another accountable. The Anabaptist concept of the “ban” grew out of this emphasis. They believed that there was a time to “kick someone out of” the church. Even if only for a little while. Only until they had demonstrated proper repentance.

Or maybe Jesus said it in the stunning and mysterious way that he did as a way of hinting that this is something that the disciples—and we—need to figure out for ourselves. To, you know, talk together about. Discern together. And that when it comes down to it, talking and discerning together is really what the church is all about.

Okay, here’s your takeaway for this week. One: Jesus comes and stands among us. All the time. Open your eyes. Two: Jesus comes and says to us “Peace be with you.” Are we ready to receive the peace and to make the peace he wants us to have? Because he’s giving it to us. Three: just as the Father sent Jesus into the world, so Jesus is now sending us. Into the world. On a mission. It may involve suffering. And, it may also involve performing small miracles! Four: the giving of Jesus’ and God’s own Holy Spirit is a done deal. Jesus has already breathed it onto us and into us. It is now up to us to use it as we carry out our mission. And fifth: one way to use the Holy Spirit is to come together and discern. Including what it means to hold one another accountable. And, what it means to forgive.

That sounds like enough bombshells or stunning surprises for one week, don’t you think? But it kinda makes us wonder what stunning surprises Jesus has in store for us next week. I can hardly wait!

Amen.