

THE TRUTH'S SUPERB SURPRISE

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
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Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabboni! (which means Teacher). (John 20:16)

When I was growing up, a strict rule of social decorum was this: never ask a lady her age or her weight. Concerning the latter, I believe I made it successfully through childhood without ever blurting out to one of my parents' lady friends: "So, how much *do* you weigh?" But the question of age was a different story. My mother would never tell us how old she was. "Mommy, how old are you?" my two brothers and I would ask. "I'm fine, how are you," she would reply. "No, Mommy: how *old* are you?" "Oh," she would say. "I'm plenty-nine. How old are you?" If we kept up the interrogation she'd finally say, "Never ask a lady her age or weight."

Well, somewhere along the way we finally discovered the truth of Mom's age, and last fall we realized that her upcoming birthday was going to be a milestone. We wanted to do something special to thank her for all the years of love and support. Some time ago my brothers Steve and Jeff both coincidentally took jobs in the Milwaukee area, and after Dad died Mom moved there to be nearby two of her three sons. In other words, they're all living the fast life in "happening" Milwaukee while I'm stuck here in New York City. So we decided that unbeknownst to Mom, I would fly out there for a surprise visit. The plan was this: on the evening before her birthday my brothers would pick me up at the airport, and then they'd call Mom to say that the two of them were swinging by her apartment with some wine and cheese for a pre-birthday toast. I would wait out in the hall, and at some point knock on the door, and the surprise would be complete.

All was going according to plan; this was going to be great. But as I was waiting out in the hall I began worrying that too much of a surprise might not be a good thing for a woman my mother's age already on heart medication. I should definitely not leap through the door and shout "Happy Birthday!" So to ease her into the surprise I used my cell phone to call her, and while I stood outside her door we began chatting. She mentioned that Steve and Jeff had just stopped by. "You don't say," I replied. When I hinted that it was time for me to hang up, she said "Oh, do you have to go so soon?" And then, while I stepped into her living room, I answered, "Yes, I'm going to hang up now because I'm here." The look on her face was priceless, and we pulled it off without needing to call 911. It was a superb surprise.

Easter Day is God's superb surprise. According to John the Gospel writer, whose account of the first Easter Day we've just heard, Mary Magdalene stood weeping outside the tomb of Jesus. Earlier that morning she'd come to the place where they had laid the crucified body of Jesus, but she'd found the great stone rolled away from the entrance. She ran to tell Peter and another disciple that the body of Jesus was missing. These two came to investigate and eventually both went inside the tomb, which would have been like a small cave. John reports that the unnamed disciple "saw and believed," but we don't know what he believed. It seems to me that all he believed was what Mary told him: yes indeed, the body of Jesus was missing. Having affirmed that the tomb was empty, the two disciples simply went back to where they were staying.

Mary stayed behind. She looked into the tomb and saw two angels, and these two didn't seem to impress her at all. Then she turned and saw a man she supposed to be the gardener. Unbeknownst to Mary, the gardener was actually Jesus, risen from the dead. I can imagine how Mary said to the gardener the same thing she had said to the angels: that the tomb of Jesus was empty. "*You don't say,*" is what Jesus might have thought. When Jesus finally spoke Mary's name so that she recognized him, the look on Mary's face must have been priceless. The whole scene makes me wonder, what was Jesus doing until the moment he revealed his true identity to Mary? Where was he while Peter and the unnamed disciple manfully inspected the tomb and then promptly went home? Was he scrounging for a gardener's outfit and a spare rake and a straw hat to look the part? Was he hiding behind the rolled-away stone thinking, "this is going to be great?" Was he trying to figure out just the right way to appear to Mary, so as not to send her into cardiac arrest? I suppose that leaping out and shouting, "Alleluia! I am risen, indeed!" would have completely ruined the moment. So I wonder, what was Jesus doing and thinking before he stepped into sight?

John's account of the resurrection, in which Jesus eases his way into Mary's recognition, reminds me of some verse from Emily Dickinson, the 19th century American poet. She writes:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant --
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightning to the Children eased
With explanation kind
The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind –

I believe that Dickinson's poem apprehends an essential piece of the Easter mystery. Jesus wanted to dazzle Mary gradually with the superb surprise of his resurrection. But what is the truth of the resurrection? What does it mean? What surprises might God be trying to show us through it? St. Paul would say this: *What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him, God has revealed to us through the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-10)*. What God has in the works for us is beyond imagining. It is like lightening, and we are like children trying to understand it. But Easter gives us a glimpse. One surprise that Easter reveals has to do with the body. Most of us think that any sort of afterlife will involve leaving our physical selves behind and existing as disembodied spirits. But what Mary saw and heard was no spirit. The risen Jesus was no ghost. Jesus received his body back again. He was the same, yet different. His body was renewed, not rejected. Indeed, Jesus' resurrected body still bore the wounds of his crucifixion, and he ate broiled fish. Likewise, the Easter promise for us is that we too shall be re-clothed in resurrection bodies. Surprise: you get your body back, but this time incorruptible. We will be the same, yet different. The trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. How old we will be and how much we will weigh, we dare not ask. Such questions break the rules of theological decorum. Besides, the answer would be too bright for our infirm delight.

Nevertheless, something else we can see in the promise of bodily resurrection is how it holds true with God's word spoken through the prophets. In today's reading from Jeremiah (31:1-6), we heard the promise of God to his people when they were disconnected and dispossessed of their homes. *Again I will build you, and you shall be built, says the Lord. Again you shall adorn yourself with timbrels. Again you shall plant vineyards and shall enjoy the fruit.* The refrain of the word "again" is significant. God promises to be the God of all the families of

Israel, and give them back again all that they loved and lost. The simple joys of living as family, tilling the land, and celebrating their faith are gathered up into God's new age, not excluded from it. Likewise, the Easter promise for us is that our resurrected bodies will include, yet also transcend the history that has made us who we are. Surprise: you get it all back again, yet redeemed, restored, renewed. Everyone who knows and loves the Lord will be there. Again I will build you, and you shall be built, says the Lord.

As Mary Magdalene spoke with the risen Jesus in the garden, and the light of recognition grew in her eyes, Jesus was quick to say, "*Do not hold onto 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.'*" Do not hold onto me. What an odd thing to say to a woman in Mary Magdalene's fragile state. Just as Mary received her heart's desire, Jesus seemed to take it away. What could he have meant? Why are the best moments in life seemingly over before they begin? I can only answer by way of analogy. When I was on the phone with my mother, standing outside her door waiting to come in, she wanted to keep me on the line just a little longer. "Do you have to go so soon?" she asked. Yes I did, it was time to hang up because I knew something better awaited her. Likewise, Jesus did not want Mary to hold on to the former way she'd known him because he knew something better awaited.

Now, some of you may be getting a little suspicious of how I compare my surprise visit to Milwaukee with Jesus' resurrection in Jerusalem. You curl your lips and shake your heads, saying, "Preacher, I know Jesus. Jesus is a friend of mine. Preacher: you're no Jesus!" Right you are, and I'm no angel either. But you have to admit, the parallels are there. Easter, while gathering up and certainly bringing along all that we've loved and lost in the here and now, also presses forward, and points our gaze to a future day – a future surprise. Here is the paradox: on the one hand, *Again I will build you, and you shall be built.* And on the other hand, *Do not hold onto me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father.*

The bodily resurrection of Jesus was an event so stupendous that it not only inspires faith, but changed the course of history. The cynics will charge that Easter is just a made-up story: the church invented the Resurrection. But the cynics have it backwards. The church didn't invent the Resurrection. The Resurrection invented the church. The historical event constituted the faith. What I deduce from these two readings we've heard today – from John's account of Easter, and from the Word spoken through Jeremiah – is that God has even more superb surprises awaiting us. I imagine that just on the other side of the thin veil between heaven and earth, angels, archangels, all the company of heaven, and the whole communion of saints are gathered. Those whom you have loved and lost are there: ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven. Everyone is there, waiting to shout surprise, speaking among themselves, I suspect: "this is going to be great." But for now, God tells it slant. For now, the truth must dazzle gradually, or every one of us would be blind.

A story out of Lourdes, France, that allegedly thin place in the veil between heaven and earth where miracles have been documented to occur, tells of a ten-year old boy who was blind from birth. The boy's father took him on a pilgrimage there and at the shrine the father prayed that his son would receive his sight. Suddenly, miraculously, the boy could see. The boy looked around, and eventually into his father's eyes. And upon looking into the eyes that went with one of the few voices he had known, he said a curious thing: "Oh boy! Everybody's here!"

When I look with my mind's eye at the risen Lord Jesus, I am moved to say the same thing that the young boy said, "Oh boy. Everybody's here." Jesus loses no one whom the Father gives him. What is more, you and I can reasonably and confidently look forward to the day when the Lord Jesus himself tells us to hang up the phone. "Hang up the sacraments and the

church and the prayers and the theological decorum. You don't need these anymore because I am here. Everyone is here." The risen Jesus shall dwell in the midst of us. As for his weight: it is an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17). As for his age: he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end (Revelation 21:6). As for death: it shall be no more. Mourning and crying and pain shall be no more. All this shall be revealed on the day of the truth's superb surprise. And on that day, I suspect the looks on our faces will be priceless.

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The story of the boy at Lourdes is told by Brennan Manning in Lion and Lamb, 1986.