

Surprise!

John 20: 19-31

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight for you are our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Surprise! As I am sure you all noticed by now, I am filling in for Kyle today. When he asked me to preach a couple of weeks ago for the outdoor service, he made things easier on me by saying I could talk about whatever I wanted. The obvious focus was to talk about how Jesus would want us to be good stewards of the land and to continue to focus on our own lifestyles and habits in ways that were positive for posterity. Jesus's body was laid in a garden. After being raised from the dead, he is mistaken by Mary as the gardener. Life starts in a garden, life ends in a garden, and eternal life beings anew in a garden. The gardener's job is to care for the land and tend to the plants in a specific space and it certainly seems fitting on this Earth Day outdoor service to recognize that at least once we see Jesus being strongly associated with the care of the land. In Genesis, human beings are charged with the responsibility to care for all the animals of the Earth. This responsibility was not a temporary assignment, but something that was to last for all time. Would God be proud of us thus far?

A recently published study revealed scientists have been able to actively measure microplastics in our bloodstream; a suspicion for much time but now reinforced by science. Our current use of hydrocarbons confirms we are certainly not holding up our end of the deal with God or the rest of creation. This pact extended to our children as well and as Rachel Carson wrote in *Silent Spring*, "future generations are unlikely to condone our lack of prudent concern for the integrity of the natural world that supports all life". Are we doing our children, the flora, and the fauna justice? These questions and issues are important and good to discuss but, plot twist, the focus of the sermon today is centered around how God loves surprises and uses them as mechanisms to do good works here on Earth.

Let's go back a little bit in the story where we encounter Mary Magdalene at the tomb. She is the initial person to come visit the grave and Jesus chooses to reveal himself to her before anyone else. Keep in mind we had only just met her shortly before the crucifixion. He did not choose to show himself to one of the dozen beloved male disciples. He chose Mary Magdalene who becomes the first preacher of the resurrection, sent by Jesus to fill the men in on what is happening. It seems he had a certain affinity for women named Mary and only after saying her name, does she recognize him. As Jaime Clark-Soles wrote in *Reading John for Dear Life*, "the foundations of the gospel proclamation rest in large part upon female figures [and] this is part of the Gospel's insistence that God works in mysterious ways, such that the least expected characters – women – appear as chief agents, witnesses, apostles, catalysts, and evangelists". Surprise! Jesus and God love women just as much as they love men and frequently use them as conduits to perform their works! Are we making sure we practice this same sentiment of valuing women? Are we listening when they come to us with their ideas and thoughts? Are we making room for them at the table and ensuring we do not merely dismiss what they have to say once it is said and done?

Jesus goes on to appear at the locked door of the disciples' home and showing his crucifixion wounds to Thomas. What is the surprise here? At the time of his death, there was not an understanding

that Jesus was going to come back from the dead. We have been aware of this spoiler alert our entire lives but the disciples had to have been shocked to see him, despite Mary already informing them he had returned. This astounding event must have spurred the disciples into action and been further motivation for them to go out and spread the news of the Messiah. Is our door locked or is it open, ready for God to walk through? Are we acknowledging the surprise as a signal that we must take action?

John goes on to tell us of another incident when the disciples decided to go fishing and while they are in the boat, a man appears on the shore. They do not recognize him. Is it because he is so far away? Was it misty over the water and fog had obscured his features? Did Jesus' voice change so much after the resurrection that even after having listened to this same voice for years while following Jesus around, they were still unable to tell who was speaking to them? It is only after this man tells them to throw the net over the right side of the boat and it is filled to the brim with a very specific number of fish, that they realize who he is. They come ashore and find him preparing breakfast for them. The disciples do not bother asking who he was. I guess at this point it was a 'second time's the charm' kind of situation. With the story of Mary at the tomb and the disciples fishing, Jesus surprises us by hiding in plain sight. Are we listening to him calling our name? Are we heeding his advice to throw the net in the direction he commands? Are we ready to jump in the water once we know it's him and come ashore to see what else he has in store?

My own name was called in ways I never realized was God's hand until recently. After going to church every Sunday for my entire life, my church attendance was spotty to say the least for the first few years of college and nonexistent after ending an engagement to my first fiancé and moving back to Nacogdoches to take some post baccalaureate studies. One of the classes I took was Maggie Forbes' online sustainability course. She offered engaging activities for the class such as visiting Appleby CSA but the pivotal moment for me was to go to the residence of a couple out in the woods and create all sorts of beautiful things from recycled glass. I was immediately hooked on the project and attended every Bottle Night I could. The more I went, the more I began to realize the people around me (Steve, Kay, Carrel, Stina, Carolyn, Marilyn, Joe, Francis, Sarah, Louise, Ingo) thought like me and had the same core values I did but they also were part of a larger community called Austin Heights Baptist Church. Now I had not grown up as a Baptist and I wasn't too keen on getting involved with a church again but I decided to give it a shot and attended a service. What sealed the deal for me was a specific part of Kyle's traditional closing statement for every sermon where he mentions God as being the "mother of us all". The idea of God being female was something I believed was possible; however, to hear it from a preacher's mouth really astonished me! After years of poor attendance and even on the border of throwing the idea of God out the window, I found myself coming to church week after week. Imagine my surprise to find there was a little Baptist church out here in deep east Texas that thought all people were worthy of love, our purpose was to serve others, the Earth deserved our respect and it was our responsibility to manage her conscientiously.

Time went on and the next thing I know I am volunteering at work days and signing up to be the worship leader or children's church wrangler. It seems someone noticed I was willing to be involved and I was then being asked to help out with Building and Grounds as a member of the church council. I spent some time working with and learning a lot from the Prayers and Squares group. Judy Patch would tell me frequently I should join the church choir and we all know how that played out. Pastor Kyle called me last summer and asked if I would be willing to work with the youth. After a couple of months of spending time with this wonderful group of young people and not seeing anyone else take the initiative,

I took it upon myself to organize a mission trip to Community First! Village in Austin, Texas for our youth when I had never done that type of thing before. They always say 'God has a plan for you'. Little did I know the plan also included standing behind a pulpit on Sunday morning as a stand-in preacher to that same little church in Deep East Texas that managed to convince me over the years, I not only belonged here but I was needed here ...and I needed them too.

God continued to surprise me as time went by. My diagnosis of Poly Cystic Ovarian Syndrome at 19 years old and a painful miscarriage in my younger days had me believing children would never be a part of my life and there was no way anyone could see past my nontraditional features and consider me suitable wife material. I tried to hide the visible side effects of my condition for years and spent too much time, energy, and money to shape myself into what society said was the 'right' way a woman should look. Surprise! There was a man out there who would love me just as I am and never try to change me to fit into the world's idea of beauty. God surprised me by shaping this person who would complement my own personality, temper my wildness, and accept me for who I am. After being married for just over a year, we announced to the church on Pentecost Sunday we were expecting our first child. A couple years later, we made the same announcement to the church once more. Both of our children were unplanned, surprise pregnancies. God put Justin here for me to show me I am worthy of love, just as I am, and helped us create our two children I thought were unattainable.

I know now that God was right there with me through all these things, hiding in plain sight. I simply had not stopped to notice him. God was there when I was registering for my classes and making sure I crossed paths with Maggie as my professor. God was hiding amongst the C & R Kutt Bottle Bottleers, subtly using them to guide me here. God was there in the guise of my fellow church members, hidden just below the surface, reaching out and asking for my service. God was there the morning of my wedding when Justin looked past the external and went deeper and chose to love me despite my many flaws, visible or not. God was there to comfort my pain and loss as well as to celebrate my joys and triumphs. God was there, in plain sight, waiting for the right moment to reveal himself to me. He called my name and it took me a long time to hear him. He had to say it many times to get my attention but once he had it, I knew it was time to throw my net over the right side of the boat and see what other surprises she had in store for me. These surprises all culminated to this realization: God really was there and had been there the whole time. God really loved me and God was using me to make a positive impact on my community.

Often, it's only after the surprise has been revealed, we realize God was behind all of it. How has God surprised you in your life? Have you heard him speaking your name? Waiting outside the locked door? Coming to you in disguise as a neighbor, church member, friend, family member, or even a stranger? We need to be ready, Austin Heights, for all the surprises God has in store for us because it will surely bring great things but it will challenge us. Who knows? One of you might be up here next because God was calling out to you. God is hiding in plain sight, waiting to surprise us and show us how our gifts, talents, and time can be used to do good works in the community. Are we paying attention?

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; one true God; Mother of us all. Amen.