

Letting God Surprise You for the Rest of Your Life
Sermon on John 20:19-29 (4/25 & 4/26; Confirmation)
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As a pastor, I'm always very curious to see the ways in which retail stores advertise religious holidays. Sometimes their slogans about Christmas and Easter make me chuckle and sometimes they bug me. A year ago around Easter, Target – a store I love – had a promotional sign for Easter that drove me a little bonkers.

It was a large sign hanging from the ceiling in one section of the store. There was a pink arrow pointing to the left and it read, “This way to Easter surprises.” *“This way to Easter surprises.”*

It was a cute, colorful sign that helped you know where exactly in the store the Easter merchandise was...but, *my* first thoughts upon seeing that sign were, “Isn't Jesus' resurrection from the dead surprise enough for Easter? Or maybe you have the empty tomb over there in aisle 10 – *that* would be quite the Easter surprise...”

Clearly, I over-thought that innocent Target sign last Easter season...but, there is a point here that is crucial for us to keep in mind.

The greatest “surprise” of Easter has nothing to do with merchandise – with chocolate bunnies or colorful baskets or marshmallow Peeps: those things are fun...but the greatest surprise of Easter is the resurrection itself – and no retail store can give us *anything* like that.

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Though I saw that sign at Target a year-and-a-half ago, it works so well in conjunction with today's Gospel reading from John chapter 20 – the Easter story that centers around Thomas and his doubts about Jesus' resurrection from the dead. I mean, if the resurrection was any one thing, it was definitely *surprising*...

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Today's Scripture reading from John's Gospel finds us on the first Easter Sunday. The disciples were terrified and most of them were gathered in a locked room, unsure what to do. They'd heard from Mary Magdalene about Jesus' resurrection, and a couple of them had been to the empty tomb themselves, but they had no idea what in the world was really happening.

All of a sudden, the resurrected Jesus appeared among them in that room and they were able to see for themselves what God had done that morning. The wounds from his crucifixion were there, so they knew it was Jesus and they were overjoyed.

Unfortunately, the disciple Thomas was not with them that evening when the risen Christ appeared.

We don't know where he was or what he was doing...but he didn't get to see Jesus like the others did – and he didn't believe them when they told him about it. Why would he? The dead just don't come back to life.

“First, I must see the nail scars in his hands and touch them with my finger. I must put my hand where the spear went into his side,” Thomas said. “I won't believe unless I do this!”

But then Jesus came again – the next week – this time, perhaps just so Thomas could see him. “Put your finger here and look at my hands,” Jesus said to Thomas. “Put your hand into my side. Stop doubting and have faith!” Thomas was so shocked that he could respond in no other way than with a stunned, “You are my Lord and my God!”

The disciples were deeply religious men who loved God and who had followed Jesus with all their hearts...yet resurrection was hard for them to believe. The world isn't supposed to work that way: the dead are *not* supposed to come back to life. It was a surprise for which they could *not* have been fully prepared.

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Today is Confirmation Sunday. On Wednesday, our 9th graders and their parents gathered with me so we could talk through the Confirmation service. As we began our time together, we explored this reading about Jesus and “Doubting” Thomas. We talked about how shocked the disciples would have been when Jesus appeared before them that first Easter evening. He had died and had been buried the Friday before...and the dead just *don't* come back to life.

Yet, because of Easter, part of being a Christian is to live believing God will show up in your life in surprising – sometimes *shocking* – ways. And to be confirmed is kind of like declaring your willingness to let God surprise you for the rest of your life.

So, on Wednesday evening, when the 9th graders, their parents, and I were gathered together talking about this story, I gave them the opportunity to write down a way God had surprised *them* – whether that surprise came recently or a while ago. I got their permission to share in this sermon what they wrote.

One family wrote about how God had surprised them in the midst of a terrible rollover accident. The mom thanks God every day that they were okay. She also said the accident brought them back to North Dakota and closer to family.

One of the 9th graders wrote about how God surprised her by calling her to join up with a student group at another church here in town. Within that group she found special connection with friends but, most importantly, she found a deeper connection with God.

Another parent wrote this: “God surprised me by standing by me and helping me to grow in my faith even in the midst of life's difficulties. I have a new found appreciation for how God works in my life.”

Jackee, who builds the slides for our 11:15 contemporary service here at McCabe has also served as the mentor for one of our 9th graders and as our in-class mentor throughout the year. She wrote about how, at a time when she was *done* with church, a McCabe member she knew through her children asked Jackee about her experience with contemporary worship services. Through that simple question, God led her to McCabe and she's still blessed to be here.

One mom wrote about God's surprise that, while both of her babies were born prematurely, they not only survived but thrived. This mom's daughter happened to share that she was surprised when she threw 70 feet, 7 inches in discus. Thrive, indeed!

Another of our Confirmation families each wrote about how God brought them together at a time when they were not expecting to find family.

One 9th grader wrote about God's help in healing her friend after a car accident and another of the 9th graders wrote about how he and his brother had *not* been excited when their parents decided to move them to Bismarck from Seattle several years ago. But, this 9th grader is now so grateful for the move – particularly because he has loved being at Shiloh Christian School here in Bismarck.

One person simply wrote, “I don't have a specific [surprise] that I can think of, but sometimes you just know that God helped you...or he had your back.”

Another mom wrote about the holy surprise of receiving the call for her young daughter's liver transplant and then seeing her transform from being so sick to being healthy.

Another mom wrote about her recent decision to be a stay-and-home parent. This decision was made while her husband had been working in Dickison for the year previously. A week after she decided to stay home, her husband was offered a job here in Bismarck and now they are finally together as a family again. A holy surprise, indeed.

Finally, unbeknownst to them, one of the mother-son pairings in our class wrote about the exact same thing. Her mother – his grandmother – died last summer from cancer. The morning she died was a grey morning outside, but, in the moments after her death, the sky opened and they witnessed the most beautiful sunrise they had ever seen...a sign from God that their dear one was being welcomed into the heavenly kingdom.

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God really *can* surprise us in any number of ways, whether that surprise comes in the form of heavenly beauty after a death...or in the form of protection in the midst of accidents...healing in the midst of sickness...finding love you weren't expecting to find...experiencing peace in a painful season of life...or connecting with God when you thought that connection had been lost.

These are all signs of Easter – God's surprises – in the midst of our confirmation families' lives. And I'm guessing not only can many of you relate to some of these holy surprises, I'm also guessing you'll be thinking about the ways in which God has surprised *you* throughout your lives. At least, I certainly *hope* you will be thinking about that!

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Nearly 2,000 years after the first Easter, we can have pretty good perspective on it...but Jesus' first disciples really weren't sure just what exactly was happening.

Jesus had told his first disciples ahead of time that he would rise from the dead, but they hadn't believed him...and, then, they barely believed him when he actually *did* rise from the dead! Surprise!

And how can we blame them, really...? Resurrection is *unbelievable*.

Eventually they *did* get it, however. Eventually, they accepted the amazing thing God had done on Easter and they lived the rest of their lives trusting God's will and spreading the good news.

Easter had been a surprise that changed everything. And God continues to surprise us to this day...because, though Easter *happened*, it still happens. And it happens whenever God surprises *us* with presence, with a change of heart or perspective, with healing, with peace, with forgiveness.

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So...today is Confirmation Sunday. Confirmation is about publicly proclaiming faith in Jesus Christ. For most of our 9th graders, their parents claimed this faith on their behalf when they were baptized as babies. One of our 9th graders will be baptized moments before he is confirmed. *All* of them are, for the 1st time, making their public claim that Jesus is their Lord and that they plan to serve him through the church.

These 9th graders have nearly completed a year of class during which we all got to know each other and we got to know *God* a little better. Since we're transitioning to a two-year program from what's most recently been a one-year program, this particular group of 9th graders got two years worth of classes in one: a year of Bible study and a year of theology and church history.

The close of this sermon is written especially to our 9th graders being confirmed...but you all get to overhear it:

Through everything we learned and talked about, my biggest hope and prayer is that you will remember God's blessing and call upon your life.

And part of what that means is letting God surprise you for the rest of your life. It means waking up each day and knowing that not only is God *with* you, but that God is guiding you...that God is calling you to help bring love and justice into this world.

Sometimes God's call will come to you through an event...sometimes it'll come through a parent, a mentor, or a friend...sometimes through something you read or watch...and sometimes you might get some sort of gut feeling or a sense that God is speaking to you. And, of course, these things can happen to any one of us!

Talk to others about it when you sense God is speaking with you. The people who know and love you best will listen and will offer helpful thoughts in response.

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Getting confirmed doesn't mean you're done learning about God or that you're done figuring out what it means to follow Jesus. Getting confirmed simply means you're willing to spend the rest of your life paying attention to God's work in your life and in the world.

As I've said, it's surprising sometimes how God works...so I hope you'll all leave here open to God's surprises – today and for the rest of your lives.