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## Surprise in the Garden

### John 20:1-18

A Sermon preached at the Easter Sunrise service, April 20, 2014 by the Rev. Dr. Carol Gregg

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It was dark. Maybe that's the explanation. Maybe that's why it is all a surprise.

Mary came to the tomb when it was still dark and she saw the stone rolled away. She told the disciples about her thesis that the body had been stolen. She hadn't really looked in, but she figured the tomb was empty. That the body was gone. Grave robbing was common, so theft is a reasonable theory. Peter and the other disciple run to the tomb, go in and see the linen clothes lying there with no evidence of what happened. So the body of Jesus had been stolen, or maybe not; we don't know at this point, so what do they do? Peter and the beloved disciples go home. Perhaps they thought there was nothing they could do about it, especially in the dark, so they left. For us this is a bit astounding. The empty tomb: that equals the resurrection, Easter lilies, pretty dresses and chocolate! What?! You can't just go home as if nothing happened! This is it, the miraculous moment for which we have been waiting these six long weeks of Lent. The Strife is Ov'r, the Battle is Done. Bring out the trumpets.

But that's not what happened according to John. The disciples saw the empty tomb, then left. No fanfare. No proclamation. Even the unnamed disciple, who "saw and believed", quietly went home. They came, they saw, they left.

Doesn't this strike you as surprising? What would it take to get a reaction out of these disciples? The huge stone that is covering the mouth of the cave has been moved. Oh well. The body of their beloved friend and teacher is gone. Maybe they were planning to look for the body after daybreak. Who knows? At the moment, this is all a non-event. Perhaps we should go home too.

But, Mary wasn't ready to go home, so she stayed at the tomb. She is weeping, filled with grief and loss. She doesn't seem to know what to do with herself, so she stays put. Once the other disciples are gone, she peeks into the tomb and sees not an empty tomb, but instead sees two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been. Angels! The narrator does not describe the appearance of these angels, but I imagine we can assume Mary knew them to be heavenly beings. After all, suddenly there were figures in white who had not been there previously. No one had walked by Mary and into the tomb – "Oh excuse me, Mary, while we just go into the tomb to sit down for a moment." No, the tomb was empty and now it has angels in it. Wow. This is going to get her attention. Now we are talking miracles.

But no, it doesn't happen that way. Mary simply responds to their question. Without any visible reaction, she explains why she is crying and perhaps hopes for some factual information from them. She is talking to angels, heavenly beings who are not a usual part of our daily lives, and all she really wants is to know is the location of the missing body. How can it be that there is so little reaction to this astounding scene?

How is it that we, like the disciples and Mary, are not astounded, surprised and awed by things that are truly remarkable? Are we too rational and logical? Or perhaps too caught up in our perceptions that we do not see? At this point, the disciples and Mary remind me of teenage boy persona. In one generation it used to be that male teenagers were “cool”, when they could just sit back and watch what other people were doing, without getting drawn into the drama. Now we call it “chill”. Relaxed, not easily upset, not easily impressed. Interesting that both these words are temperature related, almost as if describing the slowing of molecules in their being. My husband’s and my son is soon to move out of his teenage years and while I appreciate his relaxed attitude toward many things, I hope there will come a day of fuller and freer expression. In the meantime, for many of us, being “chill” seems to hinder us from seeing what is truly remarkable.

The gospel of John has a motif of seeing and perceiving. Multiple times the characters of this gospel see and misunderstand before they really see and comprehend. Nicodemus is confused about being born again. The woman at the well sees Jesus as a prophet because he knows her martial history. The man born blind and the Pharisees have an involved conversation about who Jesus is. And Thomas needs to see in order to believe. This confusion about perception is in some ways intentional, for Jesus said “I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.” (John 9:39) He says this after claiming, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)

Is it because it is dark that Mary and the disciples could not see all that had happened? Or was it their blindness regardless of the amount of natural light? Or perhaps, they, like us, just don’t know what they are seeing.

After speaking with the angels, Mary saw a man standing nearby. The narrator tells us it is Jesus. For the third time in this passage we come to a point that is remarkable and astounding. Jesus is standing there alive! He is not a corpse that has been moved but has been raised from the dead. This is the wonder of wonders, but Mary doesn’t see it. She thinks he is the gardener and asks her question again. “Where is the body of Jesus?” We as the readers know that Jesus is right there in front of her, and still there is no reaction. No reaction until he speaks her name, “Mary”. Then the veil is lifted and she recognizes the living Lord, standing before her, and cries out “Rabbi!” Christ is risen, but not only is Christ risen, he is seen, known, recognized!

Jesus had been mistaken for the gardener. He must have looked quite ordinary to Mary. Perhaps work clothes and dirty hands. And yet in this ordinary looking form was the complete transformation of our whole world. In him, the power of sin and death were broken forever. In him, we have new life now. In him, the Kingdom of God has entered our world. All this in one who appears as the gardener. It is no wonder that Mary did not react at first, for she couldn’t see the transformation of the world standing before her as a gardener. Jesus helped her by speaking her name.

We, who have the privilege of knowing the whole story, still have the challenge of perceiving the risen Christ in our midst. Perhaps when we see emptiness, we need to recognize the wonderful absence of strife and sin. It could be, we need to pay attention to the messengers in our midst,

who can point us in the right direction. An maybe, we need to look for the Risen Christ, in the face of gardeners, neighbors, and the people we meet.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus is alive, transforming that which is ordinary into the extraordinary. May we hear the risen Lord call our names and help us to see, really see, the remarkable, inspiring new life that is all around us.

Finally, we can break out the trumpets, lilies and chocolates!

Thanks be to God. Amen.