

Joke: The pastor's family was invited to Easter dinner at the Wilson home. Mrs. Wilson was widely known for her amazing contributions to church potlucks. Everyone was seated around the table as the food was being served. As usual, it was a feast for the eyes, the nose, and the palate.

When the pastor's youngest son, Peter, received his plate he started eating straight away.

'Peter, wait until we say grace,' insisted his embarrassed father.

'I don't have to,' the five year old replied.

'Of course you do, Peter,' his mother insisted rather forcefully. 'We always say a prayer before eating at our house.'

'That's at our house,' Peter explained, 'but this is Mrs. Wilson's house, and she knows how to cook.'

The Last Word from the Cross: James The Lesser

Show video Empty

James the Lesser received the surprise of his life that first Easter Sunday. And not only James but actually all the disciples were surprised at what took place that morning after Passover weekend, and the Saturday Sabbath concluded. God decided the lesser ones needed to experience the surprise of Jesus' resurrection from the tomb first.

Have you ever been really surprised? Maybe it was somebody sneaking up on you. (Share Lonney coming out of bathroom). Perhaps it was a gift that somebody gave you for Christmas or an anniversary that you were not expecting. Or even a surprise birthday party somebody threw for you.

Have you ever been to a surprise party? You get everybody in the house and then turn off all the lights.

Everyone is made to be quiet, and then when that honored guest walks through the door you yell what at the top of your lungs? SURPRISE!

And that's the word I want to share with you today.

Surprise!

One of the personality traits of Jesus that we see in the Bible is that He loves to surprise people.

Think about it when Jesus was twelve he went to the temple and began to share, people were amazed, or should I say surprised at what he knew. Mom and Dad even left him there not knowing of course and they get to where they were going and call him in for dinner. They all sit down to eat and Mary notices Jesus is not there.

Surprise.

And on that Easter Sunday morning when Jesus came back to life and rose from the grave, He gave a lesser one who had been at the cross and the tomb when they placed His body inside, a surprise that never would be forgotten.

No, it was not James the Lesser this time. It was someone who in that day would have been viewed in the public eye as even “lesser” than him. Jesus gave a woman named Mary Magdalene the surprise of her life that morning.

Think about this surprise from a cultural standpoint in that day and time. God gave the whole resurrection story first to a group of women who were viewed as some of the lesser people in society in the first century. Nobody was expecting that surprise. In the first century, a woman's words and testimony were not even admissible in court. It was a male-dominated society where women were no threat. They did not carry much weight. And God decides in the most significant moment in history to spring a massive surprise and value women in an extraordinary way.

Let me just pause here for a moment and make that a little more relatable in the here and now. If you have ever been bullied you know how it feels. And the truth is if someone tells us that we are beautiful we believe them,

but only for a moment. However, if someone tells us we are ugly we believe them for a lifetime. And maybe, just maybe that is how the women of Jesus' day felt, somewhat bullied.

Church we need to understand something, blowing out someone else's candle doesn't make ours burn any brighter.

So Jesus breaks the protocol of the day once again, for you see he had done that before when He healed on the Sabbath. But Jesus needed someone with the boldness to go and testify that He had risen. Surprise!

The massive surprise was how God decided to write women right into the most critical part of the story and give them the shot to tell the rest of the disciples what happened.

One of the primary reasons the Easter story is so hard to dismiss as anything but the fact is because it was common

knowledge that the women were the ones who told the disciples.

If anybody but God were writing history, they would have re-written it as men who were at the tomb to get this information first; but they couldn't rewrite history to take the women out of the story.

The winners are the ones who get to write the story.

If it was anybody but God writing this story, they would not have picked the supposedly insignificant group of women whose testimony would not have been admissible in court.

Instead, they would have chosen a group of men such as Peter, John, perhaps even James the Lesser to advance the story.

But that's not how God works; He works through the least expected, the lowly and the seemingly insignificant because they typically are the ones that will give God the most glory.

1 Corinthians 1:27–29 (NIV): But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him.

1 Corinthians 1:27–29 (AMP): 27 [No] for God selected (deliberately chose) what in the world is foolish to put the wise to shame, and what the world calls weak to put the strong to shame. 28 And God also selected (deliberately chose) what in the world is lowborn and insignificant and branded and treated with contempt, even the things that are nothing, that He might depose and bring to nothing the things that are, 29 So that no mortal man should [have pretense for glorying and] boast in the presence of God.

God chose the women because God values women. Jesus is the greatest advocate for women in all of history.

And it was Mary Magdalene whom Jesus had the first encounter with after He rose from the dead that gave her

the biggest surprise of all time!

John chapter 20 records the big surprise Mary Magdalene experienced on the heels of seeing Jesus suffer and die on the cross before being placed in the tomb at sundown on Friday evening just a few days earlier.

John 20:1–2 (NIV): Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!”

One question worth asking from this story is: Why did Mary Magdalene run and tell these things to Peter? It’s important to stay curious when we read the Bible. One thing we know is that all four of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each gives an account of what happened at the cross, the tomb and at the resurrection.

The reason Mary Magdalene ran and told these things to Peter is tied to the perspective shared in the Gospel of Mark chapter 16.

The reason Mary Magdalene ran and told Peter what she saw inside the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning is mentioned in these verses from Mark in a way that is not included in the other gospel accounts.

Mark 16:1–8 (NIV): When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. 2 Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb 3 and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. 6 "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. 7 But go, tell his

disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.' " 8 Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Look closely again at what the angel told Mary Magdalene and the ladies who were with her at the tomb in verse 7.

"But go, tell his disciples and Peter..." Mark 16:7

Underline those two words that the Angel of the Lord specifically said to Mary Magdalene: "and Peter."

Those two words are going to be very important when it comes to Jesus surprising more of His followers later that certainly included James the Lesser. The reason we see Mary Magdalene running to Peter and telling Peter and the other disciples what she saw in the empty tomb that first Easter Sunday morning is because the Angel of

the Lord told her to do it. He told her to make sure among all the disciples whom she would tell, be sure and tell Peter.

Hold that detail in mind as we continue with the account in John 20 where Mary Magdalene is about to start running with this news of the big surprise.

John 20:2–10 (NIV): So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” 3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. 8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9 (They still did not understand from Scripture

that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) 10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

According to the Bible at this point in the story, Peter and the other disciple of whom most scholars believe was John, got the news of Jesus' resurrection from Mary Magdalene. After hearing the news from her, they went to the tomb to see for themselves. And they seem to walk out scratching their heads not knowing what to think like most guys likely would.

At this point, there doesn't seem to be a lot of emotional "SURPRISE!" coming out of them. But what about Mary Magdalene? What emotion is she feeling right about now? Verse 11 helps answer that question.

John 20:11 (NIV): Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb.

This probably was not the first time she had cried that weekend. She undoubtedly cried at the cross. John 19:25 says,

John 19:25 (NIV): Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary Magdalene.

She likely cried when Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus placed Jesus' dead body inside the tomb.

Matthew 27:57–61 (NIV): As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. 58 Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. 59 Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, 60 and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. 61 Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

It is not difficult to picture Mary Magdalene sitting there at the tomb watching the men put Jesus inside and wondering to herself, "What in the world happened? Just a few days ago we were shouting: 'HOSANNA...BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD' at the

Parade when Jesus came riding into Jerusalem on the donkey. Now He's...dead. What in the world is happening to my life?"

God may be about to surprise us with His best when our life feels like it is at its worst.

Think about the disciples in the midst of a storm and Jesus comes to them walking on the water. Surprise!

How about Balaam's donkey talking. Surprise!

Telling Abraham and Sarah their going to have a kid at their age. Surprise!

C.S. Lewis described it like this: "God often chooses to move more through the windows of pain in our life than at any other time."

And if you are walking through a season of pain in your life right now, even though everybody has on their Easter

Sunday best and is smiling on the outside, you may be crying like Mary Magdalene on the inside.

Remember that Jesus has been known to surprise people in the middle of life's deepest valleys.

Jesus shows up and surprises people in their deepest valleys in the Bible in places such as:

In John 11 Jesus raised His friend named Lazarus from the dead...SURPRISE!

In John 8 Jesus forgives a woman caught in adultery...SURPRISE!

In John 4 Jesus helps a woman at a well who has a sinful past and a shady present walk into a brand-new future of hope when she finds out He is the Messiah...SURPRISE!

In Luke 7 Jesus brings back to life the only son of a distraught widow...SURPRISE!

In Luke 23 Jesus assures a dying convict next to Him that as soon as they finish hanging on their crosses, they will “hang out” together in Paradise later that day...SURPRISE!

As it pertains to a weeping Mary Magdalene, watch how Jesus surprises her when He speaks her name. Watch her frown turn upside down when the Messiah whom she loves calls her by name. A man she had watched die earlier in the weekend and now had come to finish His burial preparations is about to get a massive surprise!

Let's pick the story back up in John 20:11.

John 20:11–16 (NIV): Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. 13 They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don't know where they have put him.” 14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that

it was Jesus. 15 He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.”

16 Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”).

Do you know what all of heaven must have screamed out at that moment when Jesus flipped on the lights for Mary to see who it was that was standing alive and well before her?

SURPRISE!!!! HE’S ALIVE!!!!

What a moment that must have been!

The One Mary loved whom she saw put to death on Friday was alive again on Sunday. And not only did Jesus rise, but also Mary’s love for Jesus came alive at that moment with unrestrained joy and hope.

Biblical scholar William Barclay says, “No one ever loved Jesus as much as Mary Magdalene.” Why?

Maybe it was because Jesus had cast out seven demons from inside her earlier in her life.

Luke 8:1–2 (NIV): After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out;

Maybe it was because Jesus was the first man to treat her with dignity and respect.

Maybe it was because Jesus always made time for her and made her feel valuable without wanting anything from her.

Maybe it was because Jesus gave her hope as He spoke and taught with power.

I do know this, Scripture tells us in Luke 12 to who much is given, much shall be required. And Mary no doubt was given much. And so whatever the reason, Mary Magdalene deeply loved Jesus as a person, as the Messiah, and as her Savior.

See the truth is as Bob Goff has said, “no tomb could contain what love was about to release.”

When Jesus spoke her name in verse 16: “Mary,” she knew it was Jesus. The reason she knew was because earlier in the Gospel of John when Jesus is describing Himself as the Good Shepherd who takes care of His sheep, He says in John 10:3-4 “My sheep know my voice and they follow me.”

Mary knew the voice of her Good Shepherd named Jesus. The question for you on this Easter Sunday morning is this: Would you know it was Jesus if He spoke your name right now?

Earlier I told you to underline the name of someone else that had a huge role in the Easter Sunday Surprise that Jesus wanted to make sure was included. His name was Peter.

Peter must have been overcome with emotion when Jesus surprises him because He remembered his name.

After all in Jesus' darkest hours, Peter denied he even knew him. And yet the angel made sure to mention him by name as a reminder that God had not forgotten him.

When it comes to being surprised by Jesus, in the end, His words found in Revelation 3 summarize what He wants the surprise to lead to in life both now and throughout eternity.

Revelation 3:20 (NIV): Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

One more surprise moment I want you to hear is from James the lesser. However, on this occasion Jesus didn't

stand and knock he just. . .well appeared.

Show video: James the Lesser (www.skitguys.com)

When was the last time Jesus surprised you? When was the last time He surprised you with hope, with joy, with a fresh start, with a call of your name? He knows your name, and Jesus calls your name today on this Easter Sunday.

How will you respond?