

Spooky Church

John 20:1-18

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How many of you have been to the old Elitch's?
How many of you went through the old haunted house?
How many of you thought it was spooky?

For those of you who were culturally deprived as children . . .

The old Elitch's had a haunted house which was completely automated. When I was a kid, it was *spooky*. Strangely, it didn't have monsters and stuff like that so much; it had darkness . . . weird, swirling things . . . a waterfall that shut off right before you got to it . . . and mannequins, just regular mannequins.

I remember one mannequin was a policeman. It popped out of a dark corner blowing a whistle. As a child it really gave me the *willies*! Just regular-looking stuff, but your imagination would get the best of you . . .

. . . like going to the basement in the dark as a child. It might just be an old blanket, or it might be a *monster*! What if it's *alive*?!

The basement no longer terrorizes me. And with age, the old haunted house at Elitch's got less spooky and less spooky until it got boring, predictable, and lifeless.

I knew the waterfall would indeed shut off, because it was connected to a trip lever along the track. I knew the policeman was made out of metal and plastic, animated by an electric motor, gears, and switches . . . so I didn't pay much attention to him any more. And I didn't ride the ride much any more.

But one day in high school, while riding with my friend Pat, he turned to me and said, "Hey, let's get out." Not having a mind of my own, and always looking for ways to impress girls with stories of bravado, I said "OK."

We found the trip lever for the waterfall and tried to get people wet. I don't know if we ever succeeded, but we did succeed in making the ride spooky. (That was the best part.) We would stand near the policeman on the side of the track, perfectly still, looking like one of the mannequins.

The little children were already scared of everything, and we were just one more semi-real dummy along the track. But the *adults* would glance . . . and then look . . . and then stare. You could read their minds: "Oh look — a new dummy." Then they'd look again . . . "My goodness that dummy looks real!" Then we would jump and grab them, and they would go ballistic! "It's alive!"

It was really fun.

But after a few minutes I said, "Pat, I think they know we're in here." That wasn't prophetic . . . just every now and then my brain would start working . . . I realized there were scared and maybe wet people outside yelling, "Someone is loose in the haunted house!" It also occurred to me for the first time that we had no exit strategy, and I didn't want my parents to come get me out of the Elitch's Jail (which had happened to some of my friends).

Just then another cart came down the track. The carts could seat three, but this one had only two people in it: a mother and her daughter. The daughter was already scared, but the mother was bored. The ride for her was lifeless, bland, and dull . . . just mannequins and switches.

As she approached, she looked, then looked harder, and then thought, "My goodness that's life-like," and then I *moved*. In fact, I jumped in with her and her daughter. I said, "Excuse me, but my cart broke down, and do you mind if I ride out with you?"

She did not hear anything I said, because she was screaming at the top of her lungs. In fact, she was beside herself and undone. I remember feeling really bad and wanting to tell her I was just a teenager trying to impress girls (and some day this might end up in a sermon at church!), but she was in shock. I rode out with them and just said, "Thanks for the ride," and got out, while security personnel escorted my friend Pat away.

My point is, I think for that woman that day the haunted house was once again *spooky*. It was not smoke, mirrors, wires, and lifeless things; it was a thrill . . . *living*. Her eyes were wide open . . . and she may never look at a mannequin the same way again.

My question is, How's church for you? Is it just mannequins? Smoke and mirrors? Because, you see, someone is loose in this place. Someone got out who wasn't supposed to get out . . . a huge stone was rolled away from the entrance.

So you should never, ever look at people in this house the same way again, be they policemen, teenagers, or gardeners. Case in point: John 20:1-18.

For Mary, Peter, John, and the rest of Jesus' disciples, the world had become a lifeless, empty, dead, sorrowful place. Their life, their passion, and their joy lay entombed in a Judean hill.

Now on the first day of the week Mary Mag'dalene came to the tomb early, while it was still dark, and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. So she ran, and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him."

Peter then came out with the other disciple, and they went toward the tomb. They both ran, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first; and stooping to look in, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in.

Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb; he saw the linen cloths lying, and the napkin, which had been on his head, not lying with the linen cloths but rolled up in a place by itself.

Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not know the scripture, that he must rise from the dead.

Then the disciples went back to their homes. But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb, and as she wept she stooped to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had lain, one at the head and one at the feet.

They said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "Because they have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." Saying this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus.

Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom do you seek?" Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rab-bo'ni!" (which means Teacher).

Jesus said to her, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brethren and say to them, I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."

I doubt that Mary ever looked at a gardener in such a casual manner ever again . . . just like the disciples on the road to Emmaus never looked at a fellow traveler quite the same way ever again . . . just as Peter never looked at a guy standing on the side of a lake giving fishing advice, quite the same way ever again.

Mary thinks He's a gardener until Jesus speaks her name. She exclaims "Rab-bo'ni!" And Jesus says, "Don't cling to me." (This is strange because in the next section He invites Thomas to touch His side. My favorite explanation is that Jesus is saying, "Mary, you don't have to cling to me, because I'm not ascended yet . . . I'm going to ascend, but now you don't have to hang on to me to keep me from floating away.) Well, one thing is clear: Mary is undone, and nothing will ever be the same again.

No one knows exactly why Mary thought it was the gardener . . . whether it was because of location, or because Jesus appeared *as* the gardener or meant to appear as the gardener . . . (Jesus is the penultimate gardener of all Eden.) Whatever the case, I think John is making a wonderful, simple point: "Now that Jesus is resurrected, He's still around. (Jesus even says in Matthew, "Lo, I am with you always.") He's still around, it's just that . . .

He may look like a gardener;
He may look like a guy walking to Emmaus;
He may look like a man on the side of a lake.

I suspect John's making the point Jesus makes explicitly . . .

. . . in Matthew 25: "Whatever you do even to the least of these my brothers, you do to me."

. . . or in John 17:23 praying to His Father: "I in them, and thou in me."

. . . or in Luke 7:21: "The kingdom of God is within [or in the midst of] you."

. . . or as John reveals: "The new Jerusalem [the dwelling place of God] *is* coming down."

. . . or as Hebrews declares: "You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly and church of the firstborn whose names are written in Heaven, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks grace." The new Jerusalem is a temple.

. . . or as Paul writes simply: "You are God's temple."

We know that with our heads but not our hearts. So people will be polite and refrain from potty words in the church building out of respect for . . . what? Plumbing, paint, and drywall?

And then they'll leave the church building and desecrate the church—the temple:

Berate their wife,
 slander their husband,
 ignore their children;
Abuse the gardener, the poor,
 the naked, the hungry,
 and the sick.

And Jesus makes it clear, "Whatever you did to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." *Spooky*. But it makes sense, for He inhabits His people (His brethren). And we're only beginning to know who just *some* of them are.

It turns out one is a naked thief hanging on a cross. Who would have thought such a thing? Another is a prostitute named Mary of Magdela, infected with demons. Who would have thought such a thing? He could be in anyone.

His people literally are His flesh and blood—His Body. And He has "borne our griefs and carried our pain." So He feels every pain you feel, child of God, even more intensely.

And so, I wound you . . . and I wound Him. He feels it. But on the other hand, I give you a hug and a smile . . . and I touch *Jesus*. On the other hand (there are three hands), you hug me and

smile at me . . . and I remember that “every good gift comes from the Father.” You hug me . . . and *God* hugs me. *Spooky* . . . but better than spooky, *enchanted*.

The gardener’s not just a gardener,
The policeman’s not just a policeman,
The teenager is not just a teenager,
Aram is not just Aram . . .

He is the walking residence of the Spirit of God, like a wormhole on Star Trek—a portal in the space-time continuum. Think of it that way.

Look around and see three dimensions . . . maybe four with time. Scientists and wackos are always trying to plumb new realities. They postulate other dimensions and watch Star Trek and talk about worm holes.

But look in front of you: A being predestined with free will, time and eternity, potentiality and actuality, God-breathed Spirit connected to three-dimensional flesh. You touch them and you touch other dimensions. And through them God may touch you. They may, in fact, be His flesh and blood! That’s *spooky*.

God is all around you. It’s spooky if you don’t love Him. It’s better than spooky for those who do love Him . . . it’s *enchanted*.

I think eternity may be like a very long episode of “This Is Your Life.” You’ll sit on a chair and hear the voice of Mrs. Delzell, your Sunday School teacher, talking about flannel-graph Moses. You’ll hear the announcer ask, “Who was your Sunday School teacher in third grade at 1st Presbyterian Church?” You’ll exclaim, “Mrs. Delzell!” And the voice will say, “No! It was Jesus.”

Then you’ll hear the voice of your adopted daughter, or the kid down the street, or the bum at the rescue mission, or your gardener. “Guillermo!” you’ll exclaim, and the voice will say, “No! It was Jesus.” You thought you were just loving the gardener, but you were loving Jesus, and Jesus was loving you—drawing love out of you, sucking you into an eternal portal in the space-time continuum named . . . *Guillermo*. Then you’ll see Jesus was all around you loving you through people and waiting to be loved by you in people.

When my son Coleman was born I picked him up, looked into his eyes, and this just came out of me: “Jesus, are you in there?”

In the winter of 1947, Abbe Pierre, who was known as the modern apostle of mercy to the poor of Paris, found a young family on the streets of Paris almost frozen to death. He scooped them up and brought them back to his own poor dwelling, already crowded with vagrants.

He went to the chapel, removed the Blessed Sacrament, and placed it upstairs in a cold, unheated attic. Then he installed the family in the chapel to sleep for the night. When his fellow

Dominicans expressed shock at such irreverence to the Blessed Sacrament, Abbe Pierre replied, “Jesus Christ is not cold in the Eucharist, but He is cold in the body of a little child.”

And He is. Somehow the little child houses Jesus.

Little children are sacramental, physical expressions of deep, spiritual realities . . . portals in the space-time continuum . . . sacraments. They eat the body and the blood, and they *are* the body and the blood—the body of Christ.

Seeing that truth, Father Pierre knew exactly what to do.

The way you see people determines the way you treat people. You can discipline and educate yourself to do acts of love, yet they will be cold and lifeless and dead . . . mechanical. Your love will be like Christmas card exchanging. (What a pain!)

But see them as they are in Christ, and your love will be life: a glance, a touch, a comment . . . maybe even Christmas cards . . . a thousand little things that could never be codified in law. They are spirit.

At first Mary paid no attention to the gardener. Sure, she knew she should be nice to gardeners—treat them well—but when she saw it was Jesus, she came undone with expressions of love.

Natural,
creative,
uncontrived,
unforced.

In Matthew she falls and grabs Jesus’ feet. She did *not* give him a Hallmark “Thank you for rising from the dead” card.

Church can easily become mechanized. The temple in Jerusalem was. It’s tempting to become fully automated—all smoke and mirrors and cables—to be a mechanical house of nice gestures rather than a body enchanted with life.

Bodies are unpredictable and full of aches and pains.
Machines are entirely predictable, and they never cry —
but they are dead.

As a church we need structure, but in the end that’s not what we want: guaranteed, synchronized, automated greeting cards from the eternal life insurance company. “Dear friend, bless you in your time of need. Here’s your Agape Fruit Basket.”

No. We want uncontrived, uncodified, passionate, creative, living love, like Mary dropping to Jesus’ feet, covering them with tears. Jesus *goes* for that spontaneous foot-washing kind of stuff!

No painting by numbers,
Love is a response to a vision of Jesus.

Mary saw Jesus in what looked like a gardener, and she loved Him. But even before that, Jesus saw Himself in what looked like an ordinary prostitute named Mary. He looked at Mary of Magdela and saw His home—His temple—His stable.

He's born in mangers still: "the glory of God in a stable"—that's us. Seeing Christ in others is not some ignorant denial of all the crap in their lives, but a willingness to help clean it up, because of what the stable contains.

Jesus sees Himself in His disciples and in you, but He still says very difficult things. He is extremely demanding, yet with every word it's obvious He will die for His people.

Seeing Jesus in others means cleaning up His stables in love. It's not always speaking *happy* words; sometimes it's rebuke; often it's hanging on crosses. But to know when to do what, you must love Jesus in His stable; you must see Jesus in His people.

So, Church, I'm just saying *look well*. I could come up with all kinds of mechanical, practical suggestions (like writing notes, sending a care package, asking each other the five accountability questions). I could do that, but *nothing* compares to looking well. Paul said, "We no longer regard anyone from a human point of view."

Look well.

1. To look well . . . you're going to have to get close. People ask, "How can we be real and authentic with a couple thousand people?" You *can't*. Jesus had twelve, and He was *God!*
2. To look well . . . you're going to need to pray . . . not like a list, but to hold a person up in your heart and say, "God, help me see them as you see them. Open the eyes of my heart."
3. To look well . . . you're going to have to persevere. Before Mary sees Jesus on Easter in what looks like a gardener, she has traveled with Jesus for three years. She's been to the cross and the tomb, and now she goes back to that awful place. She has had her self, her flesh, her pride, and her sins stripped away.

Seeing Jesus in others usually takes time, involves a journey, and includes some pain. It's a commitment.

A Small Group can be a mechanical, lifeless thing. But if you have faith, it can be a portal into eternity. A Small Group is what we call some Christian friends you commit to, to persevere with, to pray with, and to get close to. Our Small Group program is to help you look well. A family is also to help you look well.

We're so easily distracted by smoke and mirrors, bells and whistles, but Jesus is in the gardener.

If you're new to LMCC, it might look like a lot of fancy bells and whistles. But it can get old. And Christianity can get old. Sometimes it can be lifeless, bland, and mechanical . . . mannequins pulled by strings or just an old basement full of dusty boxes and antiquated ideas.

Perhaps you ask, "Well, how does Jesus become real to me? How does my world become enchanted with the reality of Christ risen from the dead? I've read every book, I've seen signs and wonders, and I still feel alone. I cry myself to sleep, longing for His touch."

Well, let's take a lesson from Mary. At the start of chapter 20 Mary is lonely, weeping in despair, longing for Jesus. But in two paragraphs she's clinging to His feet.

At first Mary goes to the tomb and it's empty. The stone has been rolled away . . . Scripture fulfilled . . . Jesus resurrected . . . but she's still weeping.

Maybe you understand the empty tomb. It's incredibly difficult for secular historians to explain empty tomb, broken Roman seal . . . Who would steal the body? If they did, why would they die for a lie? On and on . . . logic, arguments, proof, prophesy . . . but Mary is still weeping.

She wanted Jesus, not information.

Then she has an encounter with blazing, white angels. The angels say, "Woman, why are you weeping?" Stupid angels! She's looking for Jesus!

And maybe *you* have had great, supernatural experiences. You know the tomb was empty . . . you've seen angels . . . but you want to *know* Jesus. Mary wants Jesus . . . not visions or information. But . . .

Jesus isn't *in* the supernatural vision;
Jesus isn't *in* that empty tomb;
Jesus isn't *in* the explanations, apologetics, and doctrines . . .
Jesus is in what looks like a gardener.

Take a second look at the gardener. *Look well.* Look around. It's alive! *Spooky.*

We need to come to church like children would come to the old haunted house at Elitch's: eyes wide open and an imagination ready to take flight. Imagining what God says is true, is called *faith.*

Come to church like children in that haunted house . . . or better yet, come to church like my children go to the basement . . .

I believe Jesus really was in Coleman. Coleman loves Jesus (and no one comes to Jesus unless Jesus draws them to Himself). Coleman loves Jesus, and maybe that's why this is his favorite game: He calls it Monster. He and Becky (sometimes Jon or Elizabeth) walk through the basement past the old boxes and blankets. They walk through with eyes wide open and

imaginations running wild, believing that at any moment an old blanket or coat might just spring to life and the monster devour them!

They love that game; for, you see, I *am* the monster. They have asked me to be in the basement. I jump out and devour them with hugs and kisses and life. And then we do it again.

Children of God, your Daddy is hiding . . . in the last and least.

In policemen,
 In prostitutes,
 In gardeners,
 In fishermen,
 In carpenters . . .

And if you ask Him, if you have faith, He's even waiting for you in places that seem absolutely monstrous.

Mary had never seen anything more hideous than what she saw on Friday at the cross and the tomb. But on Sunday she was devoured with hugs and kisses. "Whoever receives me receives Him who sent me," said Jesus.

Abba Father — "My Father and your Father."

On Sunday Mary was hugging her Daddy, who looked like a gardener.

And that very day two disciples chatted with a hobo near Emmaus. They invited Him to have supper with them. As they sat together at the table, the stranger took bread and blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Their eyes were opened, and all at once He vanished from their sight! *Spooky*.

Come to this table in faith, and you have nothing to fear. You're forgiven. However, this house will be haunted with a ghost—a Holy Ghost—enchanted with the Spirit of Jesus.

That was Sunday night in Emmaus. On the Friday night before that, at supper Jesus took bread and blessed it and gave it to them saying, "Take and eat. This is my body." He took the cup saying, "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

Little children, come to this table with eyes wide open and imagination ready to take flight. In truth, this *is* a portal in the space-time continuum. Watch the person in front of you as they take the body and blood. Jesus said it's not just bread and wine, but body and blood. And remember this: You are what you eat. *Spooky* . . . and better than spooky, *enchanted*.

You need some people in your life who you get close to. But this is what will happen: You'll get close to them and think to yourself, "What's that smell?" Yes, it's a stable. But keep looking. One day you'll peer over the side of a manger and say, "There's a *baby* in here!" They're born again, and Christ is being formed in them.

[Everyone holds hands.] A friend used to say, "You are touching the most holy thing you will ever touch in this world. It's the temple of the Living God."

People are getting stressed this week because tanks are rolling into Bethlehem. I don't know what that means. People say, "That's a holy place! And troops are moving upon Jerusalem!" I don't know, but right now you're standing in Jerusalem, and you're touching the most holy thing on the planet earth.

"So, Lord Jesus, open the eyes of our hearts so that we would see the people next to us the way you see them . . . and that, Lord Jesus, our lives would become spooky . . . enchanted . . . even holy . . . because we're people who do not walk by sight, but we walk by faith.

"Lord Jesus, I thank you that very soon we will see absolutely, and we'll say, "God, you were all over the place!" Thank you, Jesus. In your name we pray, amen."

Further Reading

While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. . . . So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, "Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.

-Luke 24:15-16, 28-31

"He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me."

-Matthew 10:40

Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them; and those who are ill-treated, since you also are in the body.

-Hebrews 13:1-3

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer.

-II Corinthians 5:16

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned." The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear." But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

-Hebrews 12:18-24

"And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.'"

-Matthew 25:40

Jesus made himself the Bread of Life
to make sure we understand what he is saying
to satisfy our hunger for him
to satisfy our love for him.

Even that is not enough for him
so he makes himself the hungry one
so we can satisfy his hunger for our love.
And by doing to the poor what we are doing
we are satisfying his hunger for our love.

-Mother Teresa

O dear Lord God! How are we so blind that we don't take such love to heart! Who could have thought it up that God himself throws himself so deep down into our midst and accepts the works of all those who give themselves to the poor as though they were done for him. Thus the world is full, full of God – in every alley, before your door, you find Christ.

-Martin Luther

The master became a legend in his lifetime. It was said that God once sought his advice: "I want to play a game of hide-and-seek with humankind. I've asked my angels what the best place is to hide in. Some say the depth of the ocean. Others the top of the highest mountain. Others still the far side of the moon or a distant star. What do you

suggest?" Said the master, "Hide in the human heart. That's the last place they will think of!"

-Anthony DeMello

Do you know that my kids saved my life? I was living a life destined for destruction. I knew "of" a God, but didn't think He was there for me. But, when I had my first baby – and it was a tough and dangerous pregnancy, for both her & I – I met God for the first time. I believe he sent my daughters to witness to me. He sent them here as proof of His love. Can you imagine . . . He created these precious little beings to show me how much He loves me and that I mattered.

-Kathy from LMCC

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