

### **ISAIAH 25:6-9**

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all people, the sheet that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God. We have waited for him so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited. Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

### **MARK 16:1-8**

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint Jesus. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you."

So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

## **SURPRISE! SURPRISE!**

**Isaiah 25:6-9**

**Mark 16:1-8**

Life is full of surprises. They ain't all good. But they ain't all bad either. Today is not only Easter Sunday, it is also April Fools Day. And that is kind of a fun combination—having no deep symbolic meaning, of course. But the whole idea of April Fools Day is to convince an unsuspecting victim of a big lie which is designed to surprise them leading to a great *I Gotcha* moment.

To that extent, Easter and April Fools Day do have something in common in that they both involve a big surprise—only one is real and the other isn't. When the two Marys and Salome went to anoint Jesus' body with spices and not only found the great stone at the tomb's entrance rolled away and were then greeted by an undoubtedly good-looking young man clad in a dazzling white robe—apparently an angel—do you imagine they were surprised? And adding to their amazement, the young man told them that Jesus was no longer there because he had been raised from the dead. That could have been the greatest and perhaps most cruel April Fools Day stunt ever pulled: “Ha! Just kidding...the gardner made us move the body.”

But this was no April Fools joke. And since there was no punch line and this strange man before them was, (pardon the pun), *dead serious*, the women were not laughing. On the contrary, they were terrified and had no idea whatsoever what to think. But boy oh boy, were they ever surprised and amazed!

When was the last time you were surprised...I mean, *really* surprised? It does not happen that often and you always remember it because surprising moments take you totally off guard. They are sudden, they are unexpected and they are accompanied by a sense of wonder and amazement. They momentarily—and perhaps forever thereafter—alter your perception of reality. They shake up your brain cells and challenge you to see something in an entirely new light. And because of that, they can be disturbing and I will wager you that if we

are completely honest, many if not most of us would admit that we really don't care for surprises. Children love them. They can handle them. But as we get older, we don't like to have our worlds shaken up. Because now we may have to look at our beliefs, our prejudices and our world views and re-evaluate them. "Leave me alone. I don't want to think about all that stuff!"

Well, Easter was very surprising, wasn't it? And isn't it still? Isn't there a difference between surprises only designed for short term affects—like a birthday party or a gift you weren't expecting or an April Fools prank? Or on the unpleasant side, when you arrive home after a storm to find a tree fallen on your house? Small surprises will have no lingering affects upon our lives and will soon be forgotten. But big surprises are accompanied by wonder and amazement and often have long term consequences not only for us, but for the whole of humanity. They can change the course of history.

For example, think about landing the first humans on the moon. Think about the impact a cure for cancer will have when it is finally discovered. Think about how the discovery of making fire changed the quality of human life. What about oil and the invention of the combustible engine; the Wright Brothers flying for the first time? I could go on and on, but you get my drift. And then think about the amazement and wonder each of these accomplishments provoked and how they subsequently changed everything.

So then let's go back to Easter morning. And let's take a snap shot with a wide angle lens of how that event changed the course of human history. It is important to do this because I think we all approach the resurrection account with a justifiable note of skepticism. Not only have we never witnessed anyone rising from the grave—Near Death Experiences notwithstanding—but we are so used to fake news and conspiracy theories over anything and everything, opinions parading as facts, that we have no idea what reports we hear are actually truthful or simply propaganda. It could be coming from Russian trolls.

Do you think for a moment that outside of a very small number of people—maybe a few

hundred—who had become followers of Jesus that accounts of his rising from the dead enjoyed any credibility whatsoever? Granted, people in those days were more gullible to believing in superstitions and stories of strange occurrences—or were they? But how many even heard about it? Facebook didn't exist. So it is doubtful that the vast majority had not heard about it. But even if they had, weren't they very likely to have scoffed and dismissed it as an April Fools joke as it were?

This is exactly why we must take our photograph with a wide angle lens. Because given these circumstances, you truly must ask yourself what the chances would be of a movement taking off from this point and lasting more than a brief amount of time—especially considering the mass persecution and murder of the movement's leadership in its early years. Who could have foreseen that this mustard seed would have grown into an enormous bush which has not only survived, but flourished for over two millennia with hundreds of millions of followers over that period of time? Who could have predicted that those who professed their faith in a man who was crucified as a common criminal would provide the fuel for the development of Western Civilization and the blueprint for the core values which are the foundation of what members of this civilization consider to be a moral and well-lived life? How surprising is this?

It is not my purpose this morning to attempt to convince you of something your modern mind wants to reject. And there can be no doubt that the ancients had a vastly different sense of reality than we do. If any of them were here today, how would they react to looking at a computer screen or seeing a jet fly over their heads or riding in an automobile? Talk about surprise and amazement!

And this is where you get into trouble when attempting to transcribe the resurrection accounts from over 2000 years ago into the twenty-first century modern mind. To put it mildly, our threshold of amazement is much, much higher than it was for Jesus' followers. We are accustomed to rapid fire technological developments. No one can even keep up with them.

But on the other hand, I am not quite sure how much we have spiritually evolved in the last 2000 years. The same issues of racism, sexism, poverty and abuse of power are relatively intact. Are we not still awaiting the vision of the prophet, Isaiah? *He will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all people, the sheet that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever. The Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all earth...*

The Lord God did act on Easter Sunday. And every year, no matter many have passed since that day, we who are followers must weigh our response. What shall it be? Can we still get in touch with a sense of surprise? Is it possible that it is true—just as the Gospel writers presented it? Something happened for sure. It is illogical to look at 2000 years of church history, flawed as it is by human frailty and desire, and then to assume the Easter story was all a fabrication, a conspiracy...to accomplish what? So we must have some response to that, do we not? Otherwise, what are we doing here?

Perhaps the best response is to surrender—yes, to surrender—to the resurrection in the sense that we let go of whatever negativity about our lives we may be feeling and to embrace the Divine love that triumphs over hate, the grace that neutralizes the pain of being human and the forgiveness that transmutes the past. That is exactly what Isaiah was talking about. Resurrection is not only about the physical death of our bodies. It is also about the spiritual death we suffer as the result of our all too human failings. It is the death we experience when we give in to our baser instincts while forfeiting our higher good.

One of my favorite theologians, Dr. Howard Thurman, sums it up beautifully when he writes: *Resurrection comes at the end of a long total tragedy and tribulation. It is as if a man stumbling in the darkness, having lost his way, finds that the spot at which he falls is the foot of the stairway that leads from darkness into light. Such is the glad surprise. This is what Easter means in the experience of the race. This is the resurrection! It is the announcement that life cannot ultimately be conquered by death.*

Surprise! Surprise! HE IS RISEN!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap April 1, 2018