

Good Shepherd Episcopal Church

Easter Day
2010

Surprises come in all shapes and sizes. There can be unpleasant surprises like finding that in your absence from a parish meeting you have been unanimously elected to serve on yet another committee. There can be nice surprises, like when you learn that the committee is scheduled to meet on the 31st of February. There can be few better surprises than when you are overwhelmed by an unexpected joy that leaves you giddy. If you have ever read CS Lewis' book *Surprised by Joy* you will know what I mean. In that book Lewis recounts how as a young man, one who was thinking very seriously about the Christian faith, he took a bus trip to the London Zoo. He got on the bus an agnostic. But something mysterious and extraordinary happened changing his life forever. He arrived at his destination completely convinced of the reality of God and of the Resurrection of Jesus.

In recent weeks, I have been looking at the Resurrection stories in light of the skepticism of our age. We have been taught from our childhood to dissect, to question and be suspicious of anything that cannot be proved by reason or direct experience. I received my Bachelor's and Master's degrees in science. My specialty in psychology was research in the areas of sensation and perception as well as learning theory. At that time, if I could not see it, weight it and measure it I dismissed it. By the time I was made aware of a greater reality and entered the study of theology the mood of our generation and our children's was one that no longer trusted traditional sources of authority. The actions of those in government seemed to foster mistrust. The claims of religion, those that had been accepted as were challenged: 'How can you be sure?' become our ingrained reaction.

So it is certainly not surprising that many people begin with an inbuilt resistance to the story of the Resurrection. How can we commit our life to something based on something so improbable? How can we find the meaning and purpose of our lives in something so alien to our experience?

We really need to engage this question: 'Are there reasons, apart from our emotional convictions, for believing the resurrection story.... for basing our lives on it?'

In addressing that question let me point out some of the surprises that I find in the New Testament account of the Resurrection. Probably the biggest surprise that I found was that the resurrection was totally unexpected. There is a theory that if one believes something long enough they can convince themselves that it actually happened. That can be demonstrated empirically. If the disciples had been so convinced about the idea of Jesus' impending the resurrection then of course it "happened", or at least, they thought it happened.

But that idea has no support in the Gospels. The Gospel which was just read to us makes that very clear. Mary Magdalene and the other women came to the tomb early on the Sunday morning ready to anoint the body of Jesus, a job they would have done on Good Friday, the eve of the Sabbath, if they had had time. Mary's surprise at the tomb was total. She ran to Peter and cried out: They have taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him. They referring to Jewish and Roman authorities. Her assumption was that Jesus' body had been removed. She did not immediately conclude, Oh, He has risen. No one expected the Resurrection; Jesus had given a few hints here and there, but they were not understood or accepted by his followers. His cry from

the Cross, 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' doesn't suggest that he knew exactly, at least not in any detail what was going to happen to him three days later.

The Gospel story shows Jesus' male disciples in a particularly bad light. It is clear that they had not expected the Crucifixion, much less the Resurrection. When it happened, their hopes were gone. Instead of being able to follow their inspiring young leader into some glorious future, they now felt that it was all over. The times were violent and the men hurriedly fled to avoid the same fate as their leader. The women had no such fears. Civilized society of the time gave women no status but as a result, at least at this time, they did not have to fear physical reprisals for being followers of Jesus. They could watch with Jesus and make sure he had a decent burial with all the attending rituals.

But the embarrassing fact stands that the men did run away. Our Gospels record that no man had the courage to stand beside their leader during his arrest and beatings. A lone disciple was with the women at the cross. Shameful misunderstandings, boasting, cowardice and betrayal by runs throughout the Gospel; that was the first apostolic witness. And that certainly has the ring of truth. A made up story would not have included such shameful behavior by our Lord's chosen male disciples. And consider the women in the Gospels; they are given a prominent place in the narrative, a position way too high for a culture where men had the central place. This also gives real credibility to the whole record.

What is most convincing to me regarding the reality of the records' account of the resurrection is that these dejected, humiliated disciples were suddenly transformed. Within a few days, they were reborn as men of faith, hope and amazing courage. They were now willing to boldly

proclaim their witness and even to go to their deaths maintaining the truth of their faith. What changed them? It could only be one thing the overwhelming impact of the reality of the Resurrection.

Another really remarkable recorded event is the change of their holy day. We must not underestimate what the Sabbath meant to these devout Jews. The Sabbath was at the heart of Judaism and central to Jewish identity. Yet Jesus' Jewish followers took the extraordinary step of changing their holy day from Saturday to Sunday and called it the Lord's Day. Only something awesome could have led them to do that. And we know what it was; it has been spelled out in our Creeds from the earliest of Christian times: 'On the third day, he rose again from the dead'.

And ever since, the reality of that divine surprise has given meaning to the Christian faith. Just about every book of the New Testament pulsates with resurrection joy. It shapes our understanding of the beginnings of Christianity. The beginning is not the birth of Jesus. It is not the Ministry of Jesus. It is not the Cross of Jesus. It is the Resurrection of Jesus. Hear these words of Michael Ramsey, the 100th Archbishop of Canterbury: The Resurrection is the true starting place for the study of the making and the meaning of the New Testament... for the first disciples the Gospel without the resurrection was not merely a Gospel without its final chapter, it was no Gospel at all. It is both historically and theologically necessary to begin with the Resurrection. For from it, in direct order of historical fact, came Christian preaching, Christian worship and Christian belief.

Of course, the Biblical accounts leave us with many unanswered questions. We are left questioning the manner of His Resurrection and the way in which the appearances relate to the empty tomb. We are left

with questions about the nature of Christ's resurrection body. It appears to be the same, and yet not the same. There are qualitative differences about it. In almost every account Jesus is not recognized at first; not by Mary, not by the two disciples going to Emmaus, not by the bigger groups of disciples gathered in the upper room and those beside the Sea of Tiberius. There are things we do not know and cannot explain, but two things overshadow all the rest: Jesus body was buried and God raised it.

If all of this seems academic and far removed from our day. That is just not so. The Resurrection is true or it is not. St. Paul was as blunt about that as any skeptic of today could be. He wrote: 'If Christ has not been raised then our preaching is empty, your faith is vain and you are dead in your sins. And we are of all men most to be pitied.' He was a realist, he knew that the fact of the Resurrection is the bedrock on which Christianity rests. Christ is risen, life and love do ultimately triumph. It is the Church's message of eternal hope to the world. It is a surprising and wonderful gift from God to all people. There is eternal life for all who wish to come to God. Come one and all, for you are welcome here.

The Resurrection challenges us, the Church, to get our priorities sorted out. Sometimes, in the superstructure of theology, liturgy and doctrine built by the Church, there may seem to be too much abstraction and too much stuff. But here in the encounter with the living Christ we find the essence of the Gospel. The disciples were confronted with a love that overcomes all of their betrayals, doubts and fears. The Resurrection proclaims to a world full of suffering that God identifies with that suffering and overcomes it with love. We are challenged to be resurrection people and to trust God for the future. The skeptic and philosopher Nietzsche said, 'You Christians will have to look a lot more

redeemed before I start believing in your savior'. Too often we Christians have sounded and acted more like judgmental authorities of Jesus' day than followers of a Risen Christ.

The Resurrection message is not just for the committed churchgoer. It is for all people. Our society is more profoundly influenced by the Christian faith, Christian values and Christian culture than it realizes. A recent survey shows that the vast majority of people in our society maintain a belief in the Resurrection. It shows that there are deep deposits of belief lying just beneath the surface in those around us. And there can be no doubt about the goodness and generosity of most people in this land, whether they are churchgoers or not; they are Christ bearers unaware. We must avoid becoming fixated on just the evil that exists in this world. Light continues to overcome darkness and good does triumph over evil.

But the Gospel message does say to us that if we are trying to live life without God we will find ourselves often defeated by our sins, powerless to change, subject to the fickleness of our nature and the weakness of our will. Our market driven society invites us to concentrate on short-term pleasures and leave the big questions of life and death to someone else. That, along with cynicism and fatalism work against the pursuit of the higher nobler things which give life its meaning. One of the breathtaking things about God is the way he challenges the ways of the world and defeats them through love.

The world shames and humiliates; God brings forgiveness and hope. The world says well done to the strong and successful; God speaks with a message of love for both the weak and the strong. The world condemns our failures, our stumbling efforts; God rushes to us with His

love and embraces us giving us His greeting of 'Peace be with you.' The Resurrection says that nothing can kill God's love. The Resurrection is God's statement that He makes things new. Out of us, God is fashioning for Himself Resurrection people, people who are not afraid of crucifixions because we believe in the God who raises the dead; a people who have the courage to carry the Resurrection message of life and love to the wider world through their lives, through their actions and attitudes.

Thanks be to God for opening our hearts to the Resurrection message so that we too could be surprised by joy.