

**Sermon: April 4, 2010  
Easter Sunday  
“God’s Great Surprise”**

**Texts: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118: 1-2, 14-24, 1 Corinthians 15:19-26; Luke 24:1-12**

Grace, mercy and peace be yours from God our Father, and from our Lord, Jesus Christ, who was, who is, and who is to come.

I love surprises! I hate surprises! Now those two statements may seem to be contradictory, but in reality both statements can be true. It depends on what the surprise is. I love surprises that bring joy and delight into my life. I dislike those surprises that bring pain or discomfort into my life.

For example, if I expect that I will owe money to the IRS when I file my taxes this year – and learn from my accountant that I will in fact get a refund – that’s a surprise I enjoy. On the contrary, if I expect that I will get a refund, and then learn from my accountant that I will owe money – that’s the kind of surprise I do not like.

Perhaps the most painful surprise I have received in my life was when I received a phone call I received in May of 2004 telling me that my brother had died unexpectedly at the age of 47.

Perhaps the two most joyful surprises I have received in my life were learning in the spring of 1982 that Mary was pregnant with our daughter Katie, and then in the spring of 2008 when Katie and her husband Charles were expecting their daughter Kamryn.

*Katie and Charles should get credit for the most creative way of sharing their good news. It was Easter and we were gathering to for Easter dinner following worship. They had offered to decorate the colored Easter eggs. When we opened the carton, we noticed that there was a letter on each egg.*

*On the top row were the letters: W-E-R-P-R-E.*

*On the bottom row were the letters: G-N-A-N-T-!*

*Mary and I didn’t get it at first. We didn’t know what the words WERPRE and GNANT meant. But eventually it sunk in that the correct reading of these letters was: WE – R – PREGNANT! We weren’t sure at the time that we were ready to be grandparents. But it is turned out to be a wonderful surprise as we enjoy playing the role of grandparents.*

So it is safe to say that some surprises in our lives are welcome and some surprises in our lives are not so welcome.

For the past six and a half weeks, starting on Ash Wednesday, we have been taking a journey with Jesus. The theme for this journey has been “From Fear to Love”. Using the parable of the Prodigal Son as a focus text, we have examined the different kinds of

journeys we take in our lives: physical, emotional, and spiritual. We have explored how our individual and communal journeys with Jesus can transform our lives from experiences of fear, chaos, brokenness, darkness and despair to experiences of love, creative order, wholeness, light and hope.

In looking at the lessons for this journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday, we discover that Jesus is a person whose life and ministry bring many surprises into the lives of others. For some, these are welcome surprises. For others, these are not so welcome surprises. But it is in the stories of Holy Week that we find the most surprising elements of Jesus' mission and ministry.

One week ago we celebrated Palm Sunday. The followers of Jesus were so ecstatic over his entry into Jerusalem that they greet him as if he were royalty or a conquering hero. They expected Jesus to stir up his followers and lead them in an overthrow of the religious and political systems that they experienced as oppressive. They were surprised and disappointed that Jesus did not lead a revolt. In fact, they were forced to watch as he was arrested and tried before representatives of these religious and political systems. For some, like Judas, their disappointment and surprise turned to anger and betrayal.

On Maundy Thursday, we remembered the events that took place in the upper room. This was a meal filled with many surprises. According to the various accounts of this meal, Jesus gathered his disciples for a traditional Passover or Seder meal. It was an ancient meal filled with stories of God's relationship with the Jewish people and his promise to always be with them. In the midst of this meal, Jesus, much to their surprise and discomfort, decides to wash their feet. For most, especially Peter, it was not a pleasant surprise to watch their master take on the role of servant. But Jesus uses this moment to teach them that his disciples should be committed to serve others and not be served. He goes on to command them to "love one another as he has loved them".

And then, Jesus takes two of the common symbolic elements of the Seder meal, bread and wine, and transforms them into something new. He takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and shares it with them saying, "This is my body given for you." He takes a cup of wine and blesses it. He shares it with them saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you." The disciples are clearly surprised by his words. They have no idea what he means by these words. It isn't until after his death and resurrection that they begin to understand what these words meant.

Following this meal, the unpleasant and unwelcome surprises come at a rapid pace. Jesus is arrested, tried, humiliated, tortured, denied, and crucified. He dies an agonizing death on the cross. He is quickly and unceremoniously buried in a borrowed tomb. And as they watch the stone rolled in place, sealing the tomb, they fully expect the story to end there. There will be no more surprises.

Or so they thought. But little did they know that there were even bigger surprises in store for them. On the third day, when they arrived back at the tomb, hoping somehow

to give Jesus a proper burial, they discover that the stone had been rolled away. When they look inside, they discover that the body of Jesus was no longer there. At first this looked like one of those unwanted surprises – perhaps as an additional act of humiliation. Could the religious and political authorities been to cruel as to steal his body?

Soon, however, they would discover that this was a pleasant surprise. The reason his body no longer lay in a tomb was that Jesus defeated the bonds of death. Jesus was alive and living among them once again.

So we gather here on this Easter morning with shouts of “alleluia” remembering and celebrating God’s great surprise. Not on only do we look back and remember what God once did on that first Easter long ago, but we look forward to what God will do when our journey on earth comes to an end. Through his resurrection, Jesus destroyed the power of sin and death. Because of his resurrection, we look forward to one final surprise, the one that awaits us after our journey on this life comes to an end. We look forward to beginning a new journey after we pass through the gate of death and journey into eternal life.

It is important to understand that this day is not just a celebration of what happened on that first Easter Sunday, nor is it just a celebration of what may happen to us in the future, beyond our death. Easter is a celebration of what God is doing among us today! One of the ways that Christians greet each is other is with the words “Christ is Risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia”. Christ is risen. Jesus is alive. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ is at work in our lives today!

In this month’s Lutheran, Kelly Fryer writes these words in an article in this month’s Lutheran Magazine titled “The Great Surprise”:

*Right now, in the places where you work, worship and play, God is doing what God has always done. God is bringing light out of darkness and life out of death, healing communities and reconciling us to each other, feeding the hungry in body and soul, making peace between enemies and justice roll like water, setting people free. And, just like always, God is working in and through people to do these things.*

So our challenge this morning is to open our eyes and see the presence of God at work all around us. In what way is God at working in your life or in the lives of those around you?

- Transforming lives of fear into lives filled with love?
- Bringing order to lives filled with chaos?
- Bringing wholeness to broken relationships?
- Bringing hope to those living in despair?
- Bringing light into a world filled with darkness?
- Bringing new life to those parts of ourselves that once seemed dead?

When we see these things happening around us, then we know that God is work in our lives and that the resurrection is not just an event in the past, nor an event of the future, it is an experience that we can have today and every day of our lives.

Christ is alive! Christ is Risen! Alleluia! Alleluia!