

**Church of the Beatitudes
United Church of Christ**

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“Never place a period
where God has placed a comma”

| Gracie Allen |



God is still speaking,

**UNITED CHURCH
OF CHRIST**



SERMON

“Astonished and Astounded”

Rev. Dr. Nancy Nelson Elsenheimer

Easter Sunday

March 23, 2008

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Scripture: John 20:1-18

This is a very important announcement, so please, everybody, turn off your cell phones.

The three American Grand Slam golf tournaments—the Masters, the US Open and the PGA—have just announced that for this year and for the immediate future, they have all been cancelled.

Speaking for the three tournaments, Billy Payne, the chairman of Augusta National, said that it just seemed pointless to play the tournaments inasmuch as it was a foregone conclusion that Tiger Woods would win them all this year and for "as far as the eye could see."

This action follows on the heels of two PGA Tour decisions. Just last week, it cancelled all the tournaments in which Woods was not scheduled to play because nobody cared about them. Then, yesterday, the PGA announced the cessation of all the tournaments Woods was scheduled to play in because it was obvious he was going to win all of them by several strokes and what was the point?

As one tournament executive said, "Golf is getting to be like the Harlem Globetrotters beating up on the Three Stooges, but at least that's fun to watch. Tiger winning is like watching global warming."

This was a commentary on National Public Radio by commentator Frank De Ford on March 5, 2008. Of course, he was joking. Or was he? For golf fans, both players and watchers, it seems to be true. Tiger always wins; so why bother?

Here is another announcement, so are those cell phones still off? The tomb is always empty. Christ always rises. Death never wins. God always brings new life; so why bother? Why not just cancel Easter, like the golf tournaments; we know how the story goes.

There is nothing new about the story from last year to this year. Admittedly, Easter is earlier this year. You know that in Western Christianity Easter falls on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the vernal equinox. Easter has not come this early since 1913 and won't fall on March 23 again until 2228. I, like some of you, will be dead.

I said there is nothing new in the story, but maybe there is. If we believe that God is Still Speaking, if we believe that God has more truth and light to break forth from the Word, then it is all new and we come this Easter to be surprised by the freshness of God in our lives.

There are some times in life when the word, “surprise,” is not strong enough. You need to find stronger words than the word, surprise. You need words like astounded, astonished, amazed and awestruck, dazzled and dumbfounded.¹ There are many times in life when the word, surprise, is not strong enough. You need a much stronger constellation of words.

In anticipation of my pilgrimage to Egypt and Jordan this fall, a pilgrimage which I hope many of you will join with Ted and me (shameless commercial, please see bulletin insert), I have been reading about the land. I ran across this story. On November 26th, 1922 in Egypt, thirty miles up the Nile River in the Valley of the Kings, once the center of Egyptian civilization, there was an archeologist by the name of Howard Carter. For fifteen years, Carter had been looking for the tomb of King Tut. He had dug for fifteen years, and he had only two months left to find the treasures before his benevolent funding ran out. Carter was at the end of his rope; he was at the end of his time; and he was getting ready to go home, having accomplished nothing. There in those last two months, he was digging and found sixteen steps. He dug down those steps and found a long hallway, sixty feet long to a back door. He approached that door which had not been opened for thirty two hundred years and the door had the logo, the insignia, of King Tut. Carter was breathless. Carter was nervously excited, and he thought to himself, “I am sure my benefactor, the man who sponsored this whole expedition, would want to be here for the opening of the door.” So he waited. Yes, he actually waited. About six weeks later, the benefactor arrived and the two of them walked down the sixteen steps and then the sixty feet hallway and came to the door. They pushed it open...for the first time in thirty two hundred years. They entered the burial chambers of Tut. They were astonished and astounded. They were dazzled and dumbfounded. They were awestruck and amazed. They saw the gold mask across the face, one of the most beautiful art pieces of the world. They saw the gold sarcophagus and the winged jewels. They had never seen such beauty in their whole lives, and they were breathless.

Yes, there are times in life when the word, surprise, is not big enough. You need stronger words, a constellation of powerful words like astonished and astounded, dazzled and dumbfounded, awestruck and amazed².

Mary Magdalene came to the tomb in the morning, while it was still dark. I suspect she had been up all night, crying, running the past few days over and over in her mind’s eye. She thought she had cried her last tear, and still more heaving sobs came. Grief is like that, a wave that rolls over you, sometimes like a tsunami, sometimes like a slow but steady tide. Mary Magdalene was wise beyond her years and she knew how to read the signs of the time. It was getting more and more dangerous. Jesus had been drawing attention and crowds. People were listening to his words about a new way to live and about hope. Jesus, the man, the prophet, was making those in power nervous, angry, and desperate for control. It all turned so quickly: an arrest, the mobs, crucifixion, death and burial.

The burial in John’s Gospel is much more detailed and intricate. After all, the writer has had Mark and Matthew and Luke and Q to read from and from which to embellish. Burial of the dead was regarded as a sacred duty, especially in the culture and religion of the

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² Edward F. Markquart, Sermons from Seattle

Jewish people. It both honored the person's life and the land itself, not to leave bodies to lay waste. Even Jews executed by gentile authorities, criminals or enemies of the state had to be buried, often at personal risk, and always before sunset. On this occasion, it was the eve of Passover, and it is unlikely that Pilate would have wanted to provoke the Jewish population. So Jesus was placed in a tomb, wrapped in cloth, a separate head covering, covered with a hundred pounds of spices, and the stone rolled across the opening. Jewish law and custom allowed that women could mourn privately at the burial site, so Mary came early in the morning, not only to grieve her loss, but also to note the precise location of Jesus' tomb and somehow mark the body, so that the later gathering of his remains for burial in his family tomb would be possible. As she approached the tomb, Mary Magdalene saw the stone rolled away, so she ran to get Jesus' companions. She gathers enough courage to look inside and then she hears his voice.

Sometimes you need stronger words than the word 'surprise'. She was astounded and astonished, amazed and awestruck, dazzled and dumbfounded.

It was the voice that said, "Mary."

There was a Time magazine story many years ago about an only son who went to the war in Vietnam. The young boy's troop was ambushed and when the fighting ended, the boy's dog tags were found, but never his body. The family was told that he was killed in action. Years passed and the war ended and the soldiers began to come home. Prisoners of war were released and still no remains and no news. Then one day the telephone rang. "Mom." "Who is this?" "It's me, mom, your son." "This is a cruel joke." "No really, mom, I was a POW and now I'm home. I'm really home."

Sometimes you need stronger words than the word 'surprise'. You need words like astounded and astonished, amazed and awestruck, dazzled and dumbfounded.

Easter began the moment the gardener said, "Mary!" and she knew who he was. That is when and where the miracle happened and keeps on happening, not in the tomb, but in the encounter with the living One. Mary was astounded and astonished, amazed and awestruck, dazzled and dumbfounded.

When she heard her name, she said, "Teacher." She did not ask, "How did you do it? How did you roll the stone away? Where is the body? Why did you leave the clothing? Prove to me where he is."

People ask those questions of me. "What happens after death? Do you believe in heaven?" They say, "Show me some proof, some evidence, then I will believe." And then I show them the only proof I have: my life and my story. I tell them that throughout my life, I have heard the gardener call my name "Nancy." I have, over and over, in big ways and in small, heard the words: "Fear not" and "Peace." Being with people in times of joy and in times of suffering, I have heard the words, "Love my people." Walking the labyrinth yesterday and praying in the sanctuary last night in an Easter vigil, I sat where you sit and listened for the gardener's voice. While my prayers were, "I cannot do this ministry here by myself," I heard, "I am with you." "Are you sure you want me here?" "Nancy, I have called you by name; you are mine." "But here, with these people for these times?" "Now is the time." In everyday life and everyday

encounters I have heard the gardener say: “I am the resurrection and the life. Believe in me.”

My life and my story are the only proof, the only evidence that I have. I may, at times, be lonely, but to my surprise, find that I am not alone. I have found, to my astonishment and amazement that I never know where God will show up next. I am awestruck that when I make mistakes, people forgive me and when I stumble, they raise me up. I am dazzled and dumbfounded that I have been given the opportunity every day to make a difference, to be light and leaven, to love and be loved. I have found that my life is better when I listen for the gardener’s voice.

Easter began with a calling of a single woman’s name. Easter continues, again and again, when we all respond to the calling of our names by the Living One. And, I promise that when it happens to you, you will need to find stronger words than the word, surprise. You will need words like astounded, astonished, amazed and awestruck, dazzled and dumbfounded. Listen. Hush! Hush, my friends, somebody’s calling your name. Amen.