

“Words to Live By: New Life”

John 20:1-10

Easter Morning

April 21, 2019

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*“Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?
Whom are you looking for?’”*

- **John 20:15**

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, may you surprise us with new life through the power of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. Amen.

Message

For centuries the church on Easter morning has been announcing the good news of Jesus’ resurrection with the greeting we shared at the beginning of the service. It is the Easter greeting and it goes like this: Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!

There is a confidence in these words that speaks to the way God has acted in raising Jesus from the dead. It is the confidence that the Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is the same Spirit now at work in us (Romans 8:11) and that intercedes for us in our moments of weakness and doubt (Romans 8:26).

Easter is the ultimate surprise in a world that has become numb, even dead, to the surprise of new life. New life! Those are the words we want to live by today: *new life!* Not new life in the sense of the next new high-tech gadget or car model, but new in the sense that the old patterns of death, the old habits of self-destruction, the old attitudes of prejudice, the old constricting practices of sin – are overcome in Jesus Christ (John 16:33).

Easter is about the defeat of the forces of old Adam and the victory of the life of the new Adam (Romans 5:12-18). In Christ, the old is gone, but the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17).

Surprise, Surprise, Surprise!

As I was praying about how to communicate such a message of new life today, I kept wondering about how I might translate this proclamation of new life, of “Christ is risen,” with words of joy and hope, if not humor, as Easter is often viewed as God having the last laugh, that on Easter God communicates to us that death does not have the last word, but Christ does!

And then it occurred to me: Easter, in the infamous words of Gomer Pyle, is God’s ultimate “Shazzam!” Right? God’s ultimate “Surprise, surprise, surprise!” to a world full of frustrated and beleaguered Sargent Carters! (And yes, Golly too!)

On Easter, God surprises us with a feast of gladness, where grief turns into joy, and defeat becomes hope, and those who walk in the valley of the shadow of death need fear no evil (Psalm 23:4).

Easter is God’s word to us that the forces of wickedness and corruption and dishonesty cannot win and that Christ will have the last laugh!¹

Surprise, surprise, surprise!

The old, predictable ways of sin have literally been laughed out of the grave by Christ (John 20:17, 2 Cor. 5:17).

The risen Christ does not stay put in or confined to the tombs of political agendas, or religious denominations, or even our best made personal plans.

Just not going to happen!

Instead, Christ is loose upon the world and he alludes us all!²

I am reminded at this point of the cute little story I heard of a pastor and his five-year old son. And one day they were driving by a cemetery, whereupon they saw a large pile of dirt beside a newly dug grave. The little boy pointed out the window of the car and said to his dad, “Look, Dad, one got out!”³

It is very similar to what happened in a small Baptist Church in Bangladesh during Holy Week, where the church showed a film of Jesus’ life and death and resurrection. Many in the church had never heard the gospel before, so the whole

¹ See William H. Willimon, *And the Laugh Shall Be First* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1986), 13.

² Parker J. Parmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1990), 141.

³ Barry L. Davis, *Fifty-two Sermons from the Gospel of John* (Nashville, TN: GodSpeed Publishing, Kindle Edition).

story was new. Children sat in the front and adults stood in the back of the church, and as the story of Jesus' crucifixion unfolded, people wept; there were audible gasps and sighs. But as the people watched, one young boy suddenly spoke up: "Don't be afraid. He gets up again. I saw it before!"⁴

We laugh! But on Easter there is only One who ultimately gets up and gets out again! The grave cannot contain him!

Easter is the ultimate surprise or shock to the system.

Mary and the Beloved Disciple

That's what Mary and Peter and the Beloved Disciple discover on that first Easter. Talk about shock! A surprise of all surprises.

On that first day of the week, when Mary goes to the tomb, she sees that the stone had been rolled away (John 20:1). She cannot figure out what has happened, so she runs and tells Peter and the other disciples, but no one seems to comprehend what had taken place (John 20:2).

Sure, Jesus said somethings about being raised on the third day, but no one really understood him at the time (John 20:9).⁵ After all, *talking about* resurrection at the end of history is one thing, but resurrection *actually happening now*? That's a whole other ball game.⁶

Indeed, the whole point of the resurrection is that Jesus is no longer there; the line wrappings are, but the body is gone (John 20:6-7). And it is a difficult event to digest.

Even on that first Easter morning, there are three different responses to Jesus' resurrection: first, there is the response of Peter, who runs to the cave and looks in, only then to go back home, as if nothing had happened (John 20:10); and then, there is the Beloved Disciple who also runs to the cave; but unlike Peter, he doesn't go into the tomb; but he does look in and that's enough for him to believe (John 20:8); and lastly, there is Mary who stands by the tomb distraught, weeping; she doesn't know what to do (John 20:11).

⁴ Ray Pritchard, "Why Are You Weeping?" at www.keepbelieving.com.

⁵ See also Mark 10:32-34 and Matthew 16:21-23.

⁶ Fred B. Craddock, *John* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 144.

But it is also Mary who, after the other disciples had left, begins a conversation with two angels and with One she thinks is the gardener (John 20:12-14). In time, she realizes that it is Jesus who is before her (John 20:18).

Talk about a surprise! Talk about something mind-boggling! Jesus is shattering the old ways of seeing the world!

I am reminded of one of my philosophy courses in college on David Hume, the 18th century Scottish philosopher. Hume questioned anything he could not experience with his own senses, and even then he didn't trust them! His world was closed to anything that he couldn't explain by empirical testing; and as far as he was concerned, things like resurrections and miracles were outside the bounds of reason and experience. The only knowledge was empirical knowledge.

Now, to be sure, Mary Magdalene is not a disciple of David Hume. No, as John tells us, Mary has seen the risen Lord and she is trying to find the words to share with others what has taken place (John 20:18).

And who wouldn't? That's usually how it is when we experience something so profound, so life-changing, as Christ's presence! It is sometimes beyond our human categories of reason and experience, reminding us that anytime we move from a world (defined by death and sin) to a new world (characterized by new life) we will find it difficult sometimes to communicate what is happening. How do we find the words to express what we have encountered?

Words to Live By

It is what we have been talking about during Lent: the kind of words we are to live by – words like “know” and “love” and “reconciliation” and how they point to Christ, how they can help us to understand what the life of faith is all about.

To be sure, such words can be difficult to come by, but such words can help us speak of power and truth, as well as point us to the brute fact of Jesus' death under Pontius Pilate and his resurrection three days later.

In an age when words are used by many to deceive, Easter is a reminder that words have the power to transform, to bring everlasting life.

Because I don't know about you, but I know I need to hear words of new life on Easter this year! Amidst all the distractions in our country, I need to hear words of hope and promise!

I need to hear that there is another way, another more excellent way, as Paul says in First Corinthians (12:53).

I need to hear words like assurance and grace amidst uncertainty and fear, division and suspicion.

I need to hear words of renewal and challenge in a country with growing suicide rates among teenagers and veterans, a mental health crisis, drug use and poverty. I need to hear words of peace where there is hatred and conflict.

I need to hear words that resurrect us from the tombs of our self-centeredness (Romans 5:1-6).

I don't about you, but I need Easter this year!

I need to hear words of new life: that even amidst the loss of Notre Dame this week, burning in Paris as it did, I need to hear that there is a new future; that people can rebuild and reconnect and do remarkable things when they have to, when they form human "chains" and save what they can save – the Crown of Thorns and the Blessed Sacrament, to name two. Jew and Gentile, Protestant and Catholic, liberal and conservative – all working together. What a surprise of hope and new life amidst the ashes! No, Notre Dame will not be the same, but it will be resurrected in new light.

Sound surprising?

We need to be open to the God of surprises on Easter, to realize that there is no stone big enough that God can't roll away, to understand that weeping can cease and that new life can come in the morning (Psalm 30:5), often in ways we don't anticipate (which is usually how true change comes anyway).

Words to live by! Words of new life, words of serving and loving, words of reconciliation and understanding, words of knowing and trusting.

Easter people: raise your voices! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!