

Mark 16: 1-8

Surprise is the Language of God

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We have heard the story before but what do we make of it really? What do you believe happened here? Was Jesus raised? Did God snatch a corpse from a tomb and breathe life back into him? Did Jesus only appear to be dead, and come out of a drug induced coma? The women went out for terror and amazement seized them. They were stunned to find the grave had been opened. They were dazed and appalled. Words failed them as they stumbled into the dawning day. Is it just possible that a true miracle happened here? What can we learn from this story? What is our take away?

In the first place, God's best gifts are often a big surprise. Throughout history the Bible says that God takes the people by surprise.

We are used to these stories so we may not see how surprising they really are but the whole story of faith is full of surprises. God calls Abraham and Sarah to start a new tribe of people. God calls them when they are too old to have children but then Sarah gets pregnant - SURPRISE

God sends Moses to rescue the people from slavery. It is such a long shot but eventually God wears the Pharaoh down with a series of 10 plagues. So the people escape in the night but stop at the Red Sea. Then Pharaoh sends chariots to bring them back or worse. The people are caught between the angry soldiers behind them and the sea before them. But what happened? The waters of the sea part. SURPRISE

The Israelites have to fight for their land and their enemies include a man so tall he is a ferocious giant named Goliath. The soldiers were terrified but one small shepherd boy who was good with a slingshot stepped up. People laughed but David slew Goliath that day. SURPRISE

An angel appears to a young woman and tells her she will soon have God's child, and this girl is worried because she has not been married. When it is time to give birth, Mary and her new husband journey to Bethlehem for the census and cannot find a room, but they have the baby in a stable. For

all their confusion, shepherds and wise men arrive and angel choirs sing, and this child is a true blessing. SURPRISE

Then the surprises really start popping.

- Jesus touched the accepted lepers, touched them and showed their humanity – Surprise
- Jesus enjoyed children and brought them on his knee. Surprise
- Jesus lived in a land ruled by the Romans but he was not afraid. Surprise
- When they killed him- God was not daunted even by death.

If you are honest, you know about surprises in your own life. When you learn to ride a bike or ski you wobble at first but then when you find your balance and start sailing free it comes as a surprise. When you see someone who takes your breath away and fall head over heels in love, you don't plan that; it is a surprise. Some of your best friends don't turn out to be the people you expected to like, but they prove loyal, and their friendship takes you by surprise. Life's greatest gifts take you by surprise.

Several summers ago our daughter Sarah was visiting Cape Cod with her boyfriend Paul. She had wanted to go swimming but Paul was a little nervous about plunging into the waves. It seemed a bit odd but she did not pay much attention, because Sarah did not know that Paul had his grandmother's diamond engagement ring in the pocket of his swimming trunks. After a while it started to get cloudy and Paul seemed nervous again and insisted that they take a walk on the beach. As they strolled off a ways he started talking a lot about how they both liked beaches and how important family was to both of them. Sarah was oblivious, staring at the water. When she looked back Paul was kneeling in the sand on one knee. She could not hear the words that were coming out of his mouth. She looked around to get her bearing and realized other people were watching. Dumbstruck, she stared at a ring in Paul's hand and realized he had stopped talking and was looking at her for an answer. She was so shocked she could barely speak. Utterly overwhelmed, and still speechless, she nodded. Paul cried and they embraced and over his shoulder she saw people on the dunes applauding.

Life is full of surprises but most of the time we try to control our lives. When I first got Netflix the movies would come in a mailer to my house. Periodically I would find shows and add them to the list, but I was never quite sure at first what was coming next. A friend asked me about my queue, and I had to admit that I was not sure about the order of things. With amusement she would say, "Susan

you need to get control of your queue.” That is a great metaphor for our busy lives. We have so much coming at us and we strive to get control over the queue. We want to be in control of our options at all times. The only trouble with that approach to life is that new life comes as a surprise.

Finally, you will decide what to believe today. I cannot tell you to have faith. No one can. It is up to you. Many modern scholars believe that Mark’s gospel ends with verse 8, and it ends there for a reason. The later verses appear to have been added later. You can see why people might feel that the story was not finished. The women ran away in terror and amazement. That is not a satisfying ending. That leaves too many questions in the air. That leaves too much unresolved. How do we get from an empty tomb to the church we know today? We get there because people believed in something they could not explain. We get here because people decided to believe in the possibility of miracles. We get here because ordinary men and women accept that God can do extraordinary things. We get there because people of faith refuse to accept the power of evil to overcome good. Easter is real whenever you and I make it real in our lives today.

Recently I read a story from a Lutheran Minister from Minnesota. She had planned a special communion service for the church and the families of children who had completed the communion curriculum would be honored. At the start of communion she invited the students up to the front to take the sacrament, and in their church, the children knelt with their parents on each side. Just as this minister bent down to give the first child communion one member of his family took out her iphone and took a picture. The minister was flummoxed as she tried to adjust. It was such a surprise. Her training had all been challenged in that moment. This was a holy moment, and it did not need any embellishments. She realized her conflicted feelings and pushed them aside to continue the service but later in the day when she saw the picture had been posted on Facebook, the conflict surfaced again for her.

Was this right? Should she allow pictures at communion? In the photo a little boy was kneeling between his estranged parents. His family was breaking up but they had come together for his big day. Despite their differences they had come together for the sake of their beloved child. The photographer was engaged to one of the parents and in this awkward moment she did not know what else to do. But somehow God worked through that hard painful time to bring a glimpse of a new way forward.

Then Rev. Roth reflected on the surprise. “Maybe it was the chaos of the thing, the unplanned disruption in the midst of the sacrament. I like things to be well-rehearsed, to flow smoothly and this was interrupted by an unscripted moment. Perhaps there is even a part of me that would like to leave Jesus’ story in the past, where I hold onto the illusion that I can control it. Yet I can see the picture in my mind. The child in the middle, his hand outstretched, his parents smiling. They have laid their weapons down. At God’s table they will take this bread and cup. And in the midst of that ancient story, in the chaos of life right now, someone took a picture and photographed “love one another as I have loved you.” {“Scene at the Table” by Diane Roth *Christian Century* March 18, 2015. P. 11.}

The Bible tells us that God’s best surprises come to bring us the gift of hope. Easter’s huge surprise tells us that we don’t have to be afraid of having faith in God. God will not let us down. There may be dark days in life but God is always on the side of new life. God wants to make our lives new, but we will need to be open to that possibility.

The story of Easter does not end in Mark’s gospel. It is open-ended because we need to provide the ending. We need to write the story of Easter with our lives. The women came to the tomb in the morning. All worried about whether they could roll the stone away, they discovered that their fears did not matter because Jesus was gone. He was risen. SURPRISE.