

John 20: 19-23
More Easter Surprises
Sunday April 12, 2015
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The Congregational Church of Needham

Our theme for April is Surprise. Last week we talked about how surprising Easter was for the disciples. You remember that when the women discovered that Jesus' body was missing they saw a man in white who was their only source of information? He said that Jesus had gone to Galilee – which was a day's journey to the North – kind of a hike for a newly-alive dead man. But the surprises did not end there. The rest of the day was pretty unbelievable as well. The disciples returned to an Upper Room, and locked the door. They were so rattled by the news of the missing corpse that they needed to get their bearings, establish some boundaries and feel secure. But just as they were settling down that evening, Jesus appeared to them, by walking through the locked door. What is going on here?

Well, I think that most of us expect Easter to be different. We set very specific expectations for that day. We all celebrate the holiday with some very specific rituals that make Easter a day apart. We dress up more than usual. We travel to attend family meals. We hunt for eggs and go to brunch. We abstain from mowing the lawn and generally celebrate the day. But when Easter is over, on Sunday evening we prepare to get back to normal for the week ahead. We don't expect Easter to affect the rest of our week. But the Bible says that Easter continued to surprise the disciples for days. Easter was not just one shock. It was a series of seismic shifts that kept on coming and eventually changed life as they knew it. Easter was a total surprise on the day it happened, but it continued to re-arrange the way that they viewed life itself for the rest of their lives. Let's take a closer look.

In the first place Easter meant that the disciples did not fear death. When you lived in a country that was occupied by Rome you lived in fear for your life. The Romans held whole populations in terror because they were not afraid to kill people, often ruthlessly. They knew how to fight their battles efficiently, and they knew how to maintain control over other countries by their determined use of violence. What they did to Jesus was pretty common for the Romans. They simply had zero tolerance for any form of sedition. Even a hint of

political rebellion would get you crucified. For them life was cheap and they had an evil genius for control. Most people in the Roman Empire had the good sense to live in fear of them.

Jesus first attracted a following because people were inspired by his courage. He gave voice to their frustrations with a feisty nerve. Sometimes he was reckless in his rebellion. He cared little about how people felt about him. And folks loved his fearlessness, because they felt scared most of the time. But Jesus did something else. He demonstrated Rome's moral corruption in the same way that Mahatma Gandhi demonstrated the moral ambiguity in the way that the British Empire controlled India. Christ confronted Rome not as a warrior but as an unarmed non-violent resister. When they had done their worst to this man of peace God surprised everyone by demonstrating that they could not defeat Jesus. Evil could not overcome good in the end. His resurrection was a rebuke of the authority of the Roman Empire. The central claim of the Bible is that this man who was rejected, tortured and crucified was resurrected as Lord of the entire Earth. So when the first disciples gathered to break bread they would say the most surprising thing that they could as citizens of the Roman Empire- "Jesus is Lord". That was a very dangerous and seditious political statement in a world where the politically correct and sensible thing to say was "Hail Caesar; Caesar is Lord".

Do you remember the old story about the Philistine giant named Goliath? He held the Hebrews in terror because he was so large and strong. But an unlikely adversary who knew his own strength could see the giant's weakness. That shepherd boy, David, used his slingshot to good advantage to take Goliath by surprise. He prevailed for the same reason that Jesus prevailed against Rome. Both had the natural charisma of the fearless. The Romans under-estimated what would happen when they crucified Jesus. When he rose from the dead he gave his followers a kind of hope which no empire could stop. His followers were not scared any more. For example, Peter was utterly transformed. This man who had cowered in the shadows of the courtyard when Jesus was being tried and tortured found the courage to start the greatest religious movement of human history.

When Jesus rose from the dead he put death itself in perspective. Suddenly death had no power over his followers. That is one of the great surprises of the resurrection that I believe we are still absorbing all these

years later. Every once in a while we see someone who is not afraid of death. They remind us of how strong faith can be. This week one such young woman died. This story is not about her death, but about her short life and how she lived it. Her name was Lauren Hill. She was a freshman at Mount Saint Joseph University in Cincinnati. As a girl she was diagnosed with a pediatric brain tumor. But she decided not to wallow in self-pity but to raise money and awareness for cancer research. Her story so inspired folks that she raised way over a million dollars, most of it by playing basketball, her great love. Though she lived with her diagnosis for a number of years she did not fear death so much that she refused to go full throttle right to the end. She played ball all this fall and when the NCAA heard her story they re-arranged the roster of games so she could play in November. She started the game with four baskets in a row in front of a crowd of 10,000 people who were on their feet. Runner up for NCAA Athlete of the Year in 2014, last Sunday on Easter, she was given the Pat Summit Courage Award. She died on Friday. But the reason she inspired so many people is because she was never so afraid to die that she was afraid to really live every minute she had. She is a modern example of the meaning of Easter for those who believe in the power of life to overcome death.

Easter changed the way the disciples lived their lives too. Instead of being scared and powerless they began to see that God's kingdom provided values that gave them hope. In a world where Rome controlled the populace by a heavy tax structure and most people were terrified of losing their land Jesus said "Blessed are the poor". In a region where folks felt insignificant and even lost in the shifting sands of this powerful empire, Jesus told them God would search for them like a woman who had lost a coin or a shepherd with sheep or a father whose son had gone astray. In a kingdom ruled by violence where political leaders were routinely crucified and left there as a warning to others Jesus knelt down to wash his disciples feet and talked about his broken body as though it were a gift not a defeat. Jesus took that world and turned it on its head.

Suddenly after he rose from the dead, his followers established a new way of doing business. He called it the Kingdom of God; it was a world in which lepers were people, the poor were blessed, the marginalized were invited to the table, the prodigals were welcomed home, women were listened to, and power was decentralized. Jesus brought a new reality to life and his kingdom toppled the Roman one. The Romans outlawed the Christians. They put them in prison, and the Christians recruited other prisoners. They tortured them but the

Christians were not afraid. They killed them but they kept on multiplying. Because Jesus rose they did not fear death, but they also did not fear life.

They re-ordered life on their terms. They were bold to create churches that welcomed everyone, fed the hungry, visited the prisoners, clothed the naked, and inspired people so that within a few decades they were recruiting prominent Roman nobility. The Roman way of life was done when Christians converted Helena-Constantine's mother. Not only did she use her considerable wealth to start churches all around the Mediterranean, but she influenced her son so he converted too. Then it was only a matter of time. God's surprise to the world was that God would be taking on the Roman Empire.

Finally, Easter is not about heaven in the sweet by and by. It is a story about how we transform this world in light of the kingdom of God that breaks in on Easter. Many churches teach that the point of the resurrection was that Jesus died for our sins. More and more scholars are questioning the traditional ideas about atonement. So today, the big surprise of Easter is that modern people of faith have choices about what we believe. We can focus on finding our way to heaven, or on making the earth reflect the values of God's kingdom. We can worry about death or put all our energy into living with zest no matter what happens.

Easter is a rebuke to all empires, then and now. During the Middle Ages I don't know why the church pushed this idea that people were born in sin, but it did serve the purpose of giving the church a great deal of control over people's lives. It put their energy and focus on achieving a heavenly rest instead of going to hell. If the church established itself as the gatekeeper of your place of eternal rest the theory of what the resurrection meant established the church as the major empire in its time. But the sad news here was that the church in those years, like all empires was tempted like all human institutions to abuse that kind of power, and it often has. But the other sad result of telling people that the prime reason Jesus died and rose from the dead was to atone for our sins, is that it shifts all human energy away from the tasks of building God's kingdom here and now on the earth.

So what would change if we took the resurrection seriously in the ways the disciples did. What empires would we be up against? People on the right claim that they know what Jesus would do and people on the left are sure that he would support their causes. Jesus would surprise us all. Easter is a call to action. “It is a call to rise up, to act up, to announce that the powers and principalities that rule our nations have an expiration date. Their rule is a sham; their kingdom has been undone.” The time has come, Easter people, to stop the systems that help one percent of the population from collecting a huge proportion of the wealth while the other people get poorer and poorer in comparison. In God’s kingdom the last will be first. The outsiders are preferred.

Easter teaches us that even in the midst of the kingdom we live in it is possible to pledge our loyalty to a new and different reality – a reality not based on power or money. By feeding the hungry, forgiving your enemies, providing shelter for the homeless you chose to live in Christ’s kingdom. 2000 years later the promise of Easter has not lost its power. But the imperative to demonstrate that power rests on us – Christ’s disciples here and now. What are we doing to surprise the world? How are we living in light of God’s kingdom? What are we doing to level the economic playing field? What are we doing to welcome the outcast and lift the prospects of the imprisoned? What are we doing to make Easter real in our time?

I cannot answer for you. But Easter requires me to ask the question.