

Full of Surprises (Luke 24.1-11) | Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

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Surprises

- Thinking back we can probably all remember at least one or two moments when we were genuinely surprised by something.

Reasonable Reactions

- A very natural first reaction to the character of Jesus is that of *surprise*. Even before we're moved by Jesus' compassion or drawn in by his humility or inspired by his example, we're usually first *surprised* by him.
- And we see this when reading the biographies written of Jesus in the first century. All four of the gospels convey this kind of reaction to Jesus' life. We're always reading that the characters surrounding Jesus are *amazed* or are caught up in a kind of *wonder*.
- Jesus does this or that, and everyone's taken aback. Everyone expects Jesus to go this way, but he goes another. People project all kinds of things onto Jesus, all kinds of expectations, and more often than not Jesus confounds them.
- This confounding of people's expectations is most startling, most dramatic when it comes to the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. His biographers are keen to tell us that Jesus' friends and followers are completely shocked by what happens between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.
- St Luke says, for example, that the women who turned up the Sunday following the Friday after Jesus died "stood their puzzled..." (Luke 24.4), that "they stood there in disbelief" (Luke 24.41), and even that the first time Jesus' friends heard the news that he wasn't dead but was alive "the story sounded like nonsense... so they didn't believe it." (Luke 24.11). St Mark says the people who witnessed

Jesus' death and resurrection were "trembling and bewildered..." (Mark 16.8). St Matthew says that people "ran quickly from the tomb. They were frightened but also filled with great joy..." (Matthew 28.8). And St John also tells us that Jesus' friends frantically ran to and from the tomb at the shock that his body wasn't there (John 20.2-3).

- So in each of the gospels you get the sense that the events on Good Friday and Easter Sunday produced extreme reactions. No one is responding to Jesus' death and resurrection with "Oh, isn't that nice" or, "I'm so glad it all worked out. I knew it would in the end, just as we hoped". The people who were there, who lived these events are either running around, not sure of what to do with themselves, or standing there scratching their heads. Some of them are even denying outright the possibility of what they're being told – "that's just not possible" they think.
- In fact, that's one of a number of reasons why Jesus' death and resurrection has such historical credibility in ancient literature. Historians tell us that nothing like this was being talked about by Jesus' contemporaries – the devastating failure of a perceived Jewish hero and then his resurrection. In other words, none of it was expected. It's such a strange story that we're forced on historical grounds to say "you really couldn't make that up" based on the worldview and expectations of the time and culture.
- So even though we may be to some degree used to the story today, Good Friday and Easter Sunday was a *surprise* to the people who experienced it first-hand. People didn't really expect that Jesus' promising life would end in torture and death - which is why they're all so dejected after his crucifixion - and then they certainly didn't anticipate Jesus' resurrection.

Good (surprising) News

- And that's the really good and surprising news that we celebrate at Easter, the pinnacle of a story about God's surprising character and way of doing things.

- It's why seasons like Christmas and Easter can't be summed up in a soundbite, or a sermon for that matter. (It's why they demand reflection and continue to draw out exquisite art over the centuries.)
- Easter causes us to take another look, maybe to scratch our heads. If we're supposed to look at Jesus in order to know who God is, what God's really like, as the story suggests, we are time and again thrown for a loop. Our theories about God, when we consider Jesus, are many times turned on their heads.
- You might not expect to find God in the hay, but there's the infant Jesus laying the manger at Christmas. You might not expect God to share dusty roads or dim firelight, but there's Jesus hiking up to Jerusalem or warming his hands by the fire; you might not expect God to make friends with despicable, disreputable characters, but there is Jesus putting his arm around all kinds of people we'd probably rather stay at arms' length from; you might not expect God to roll up his sleeves and do the dishes, but there's Jesus washing dirty, smelly feet the night before his execution (how would we choose to spend our final hours?); you might not expect to find God sharing the dreadful reality of human suffering and failure, but there is Jesus nailed to a Roman cross; and you might not expect God to validate Jesus' death on the cross as the strange path to reconciliation and wholeness by raising him from the dead, but there is Jesus, alive on Easter morning.
- If Jesus is the lens we see God through, then Easter says that *God is not where you might expect God to be; or doing what you expect God to be doing.*

Jesus (full of surprises)

- *Jesus is full of surprises.* And his life, death and resurrection carry us into the reality of God. Jesus takes us into the truth of God.
- Is God malevolent or kind? Look at Jesus touching the untouchable, embracing the despised. Is God patient and humble or quick-tempered and proud? Look at Jesus being spit on and beaten up. Is God generous and self-sacrificial or greedy and self-serving? Look at Jesus being nailed to a Roman cross and uttering

words of forgiveness to his executioners. Is God willing to help, to deal with the problem none of us can get on top of, none of us can solve, the problem of death. Look at Jesus' empty grave and consider the possibilities.

- The gospel stories tell us that in Jesus' life, death and life again, God is present in his crucified and then resurrected human body. And through that body, through the life of Jesus, things are made possible. Forgiveness is possible, reconciliation is possible, human togetherness and renewal is possible, fresh beginnings are possible.

Everyday Surprises

- So the surprising news of Easter is that God's there in all the places and moments we're absolutely sure he isn't or shouldn't be - making things possible.
- So, you might not expect to meet God in the dementia ward or oncology unit in the middle of loss and suffering, but there God is in the compassion of a friend. You might not expect to meet God in your failure or despair, but there God is in a quiet moment giving you the grace to keep going. You might not expect to meet God "among the (ordinary) living" but there God is in every face and interaction.
- You might not expect to meet God in a drafty gymnasium on a wet Sunday morning, along with a bunch of ordinary people like yourself, working out the simple but profound commitment to loving community - but here God is.
- As one writer puts it we are where "God happens" (Rowan Williams, *Silence and Honey Cakes*).
- Easter tells us that God isn't somewhere else, more holy, removed, but right here, right now, able to be discovered, known, worked out. Easter tells us that God and God's life is possible in the here and now.

Easter Surprise

- So Easter, the remembrance and celebration of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is, in large part, simply about reminding ourselves to be on lookout for the surprising reality of God in the everyday realities we already live in.

- Be on the lookout for God's surprising humility and love in the welcome and kindness of a friend.
- Be on the lookout for God's surprising presence with you in your pain, disappointment or disillusionment in the quiet lonely moments.
- Be on the lookout for God's surprising forgiveness and compassion in this very moment.
- Be on the lookout for God's surprising commitment to you, even though you feel you've not felt all that committed to God lately.
- Be on the lookout for God's surprising way of bringing healing and hope out of the bleakest of situations.
- Be on the lookout for God's surprising action to burst through, even today, making possible what you didn't previously expect.
- It might sound like nonsense at first – but that's where we always begin with God, who very often takes by surprise.

Two Closing Thoughts:

- Let your theories about God be dismantled by and then re-designed by Jesus.
- "Let God happen" in your interactions and surprise the world by showing it what God's like through your life.

Discussion Questions

- Share a time you were totally surprised by something.
- What is surprising about Jesus as he shows us what God's like? What make Jesus a surprising figure?
- Why are Good Friday and Easter Sunday surprising?
- What theory's about God get dismantled when we consider Good Friday and Easter Sunday?