

Signs of Significance
Easter: Surprise!
John 20:1-18
Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church
March 23, 2008

Rev. Melanie Lee Carey

Happy Easter to all of you on this day in which the weather outside seems more like Christmas than Easter.

How strange and surprising it was on Friday night to be driving to the community Good Friday service in a snow storm! I checked the calendar for the coming years and the good news is that Easter comes this early only once a century. The next time Easter will come this early will be in the year 2160! Our organist Ron Miller has already requested that Sunday off, as he tells me that he plans to take his mother on a cruise that year!

This year Easter has surprised us with both its early arrival and with the wintry weather. And as I was preparing for this Easter message, I kept thinking about how surprises are so much a part of what Easter is all about.

On that first Easter morning, John's gospel account records numerous surprises. The first surprise is that the stone has been rolled away.

And this is so surprising to Mary Magdalene, that she assumes grave robbers have been at work. She runs to tell Simon Peter and John that Jesus' body has been stolen.

The next surprise comes when Simon Peter and John come running to the tomb, responding to Mary's outcries. They both are shocked and stunned when they go in the tomb and find the grave clothes just lying there. Even more shocking is the fact that the clothes used to wrap Jesus' body are in one place and the kerchief, which was placed on Jesus' head is in another place, not near the other clothes. Adding to this surprise is the fact that the kerchief is neatly folded—surely grave robbers would not have taken the body and left the grave clothes behind! And they certainly would not have taken the time to neatly fold the head cloth and place it away from the other linens.

It is surprising, it is shocking, it is astonishing and Simon Peter and John leave the tomb to try and figure out what this all means.

And then the surprises continue as Mary weeps outside the tomb, and then looks inside, and see two angels sitting there where Jesus body had been. And then she is even more surprised as she turns away from the tomb and sees Jesus, who she thinks is the gardener.

And when this "gardener" speaks her name, she is stunned, as she realizes it is Jesus, and he is alive and present with her!

From the stone being rolled away to Jesus standing there right in front of Mary, Easter is about surprises.

And perhaps the most surprising thing of all is that Jesus, who was dead and buried, shows up. Not just to Mary, but also to the disciples as well. The surprise of Easter is that Jesus who was dead, is now a living spiritual reality in their lives. Sometimes he was experienced in visions, sometimes as an abiding presence. But the point is that Jesus was present in their lives. He was there in their homes and workplaces. Easter is a day of surprises, but the biggest surprise of all is that Jesus shows up.

A theological student, asked to summarize the gospel in a few words responded 'In the Bible it gets dark, then it gets very, very dark and then Jesus shows up. ⁱ

The Surprise of Easter is that Jesus showed up where the disciples were and the ongoing surprise is that that he continues to show up for you and for me where we live too.

Somewhere or other I heard of a Sunday School teacher who had just finished telling her third graders about how Jesus was crucified and placed in a tomb with a great stone sealing off the only way in or out. Then, wanting to share the excitement of the resurrection, and the surprise of Easter morning, she asked: "And what do you think were Jesus' first words when he came bursting out of that tomb alive."

A hand shot up into the air from the rear of the classroom. It belonged to a most excited little girl. Leaping out of her chair she shouted out excitedly I know, I know, I know. Good said the teacher. Tell us.

Extending her arms high in the air she sang out "Ta Da!"

Like the little girl tells us , Easter's surprising good news is that Jesus shows up for us. "Ta-da" Here he is in our lives.

With all the resurrection talk, we sometimes think that Easter is only about the future. We think that Easter is only about heaven and life after death.

Surprise! Easter is so much more than that! Easter is also about our lives here and now and about the way we live them. Jesus shows up and in so doing he shows us that new life is found not only in heaven, but in the here and now as well.

Like Mary weeping outside of the tomb, Jesus shows up when we are crying, in the very midst of our despair—Surprise! In the midst of war, in the midst of the winter, in the midst of sorrow, in the midst of illness, pain, job loss, fear—that is when Jesus shows up. And his presence changes us. His presence gives us strength, it gives us courage, it moves us to action.

Easter is not only the triumph of something that happened a long time ago—but also an experience of how to make sense of life here and now. Easter tells us how to face the powers of death which already have us in their grips. The surprise is that Jesus showed up for his original disciples and the surprise is that he continues to show up for you and me.

When we walk though the valley of the shadow of death, time and again we look up and realize that we're not walking by ourselves.

Surprise! Jesus has shown up and Jesus is with us.

When we come to some dead end in life, we look over the brink, into the dark abyss to our surprise and delight, there He is, awaiting us, a light in the darkness. Surprise! Jesus has shown up and Jesus is with us.

When we log onto the internet, or we pick up the newspaper and we read about what is going on in the world—when shake our heads in despair, when we throw up our hands, give up, and give in. Surprise! Jesus has shown up and Jesus is with us. He is here where we live-- where we bring up our children, earn our livings, pay our taxes, cast our votes.ⁱⁱ That is where Jesus shows up. That is where Jesus is present. The surprising good news of Easter is that the risen Christ shows up in our lives and is with us as we face our darkest hours.

Easter is not just about heaven, it is about how we live our lives and how we face our struggles and how we find courage. It is about the fact that Jesus shows up for us. That Jesus finds us when we're lost, that Jesus walks with us in despair, and that his presence makes all the difference.

Theologian Linda Maloney tells how she once asked a clergywoman from Australia how churches in the southern hemisphere cope with Christian seasons that are always tilted toward people in the northern hemisphere - Easter with springtime, Christmas with winter. Her friend had a very interesting response.

"In fact we have an advantage over you," she said. "Our Easter is happening when nature is declining rather than blossoming, therefore we are reminded that Easter stands for far more than just nature's renewal of life." Easter is an event beyond seasons, beyond time and space. Easter is resurrection: impossible hopes made possible by the power of Christ raised from the dead. ⁱⁱⁱ

The Surprise of Easter is that we are encountered by a Christ who is unwilling to let the story of us and God end in death. Instead he shows up and breaths new life into us. Surprise! Ta-da! Jesus is here. He was dead, he was buried, but now he is back. He is with us, where we live, he is with us, where we work, he is with us where we struggle and hurt. Jesus shows up and he brings us new life right here, right now. ^{iv}

This is surprising and wonderful good news. Happy Easter! Amen.

ⁱ Willimon, Will "Preaching Easter in Alabama" Journal for Preachers Vol. XXXI No. 3 Easter 2008 p.7

ⁱⁱ Brown Taylor, Barbara "Easter Sunday 2006" Journal for Preachers Vol. XXXI No. 3 Easter 2009 p.

13

ⁱⁱⁱ Rev. Peter Buehler, Sermon: "Further Up And Further In!" as quoted in www.esermons.com Easter Illustrations 2008

^{iv} Peterson, Eugene H. Living the Resurrection: the Risen Christ in Everyday Life. Navpress, Colorado Springs, Colorado 2006 pp 67-68