

Mount Olive Lutheran Church
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The Resurrection of our Lord (Easter Sunday)
April 4, 2010
Luke 24:1-12

"An Easter Morning Surprise"
by Pastor Mark E. Wangerin

Introduction

A most blessed Easter to all gathered here this morning and those listening on the radio! The four evangelists have left us with four accounts of the resurrection of our Lord. Some have seen this as a difficulty, since some of the portions of the accounts seem hard to reconcile with each other. Others have pointed out that the Lord has blessed us with these viewpoints with differing perspectives for they all witness powerfully to the resurrection. As I looked back over my numerous Easter sermons, I discovered that I had never preached on these words of our text for today. They are the beginning of St. Luke's account of the events of that first Easter day which later in this chapter includes the story of Jesus' meeting with the Emmaus disciples and then His appearance to the disciples in the upper room. But before us in this text are some important points for this day which we will look at under the theme: "An Easter Morning Surprise."

I. Surprised by What They Saw

The Gospel begins with an indirect reference to someone mentioned in the previous chapter: "On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb." Who are they? From chapter 23 we read: "The women who had come with him from Galilee followed and saw the tomb and how his body was laid. 56 Then they returned and prepared spices and ointments. On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment." So it is the women who came that early morning, the first day of the new Sabbath week as the text literally says. Some of them are named a little later in our reading: Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women ... And what a surprise did they see. The great stone rolled in front of the tomb had been rolled away—quite a feat of strength. But the greatest surprise awaited them inside the tomb—for "they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." All of their preparations for that day were for naught. There was no body to be prepared for its final rest. And they were perplexed. The next surprise to greet their eyes was even more astounding. "Two men stood before them in dazzling apparel." St. Luke uses very similar words to describe the appearance of the clothing of these two messengers to the appearance of Jesus on the mount of Transfiguration—his clothing was also "dazzling"—shining. In fear, the women bow their faces to the ground. What other surprise awaits them?

II. Surprised by What They Heard

The words they heard from the messengers (the angels) were the next surprise. "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you,

while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." They hear a very concise sermon here. Beside the fact that Jesus is not there, they are reminded of Jesus' own words, the summary of his task, the culmination of his work. He would be delivered and crucified not just into the hands of sinful men but for sinful men. And most emphatically on the third day he would rise.

The Gospel says that the women remembered his words. Their memory was jogged by the word of the angels. But those words would have seemed so hollow and meaningless just a short time before until they were confronted by their Easter surprise. Our text concludes by saying that the women went and "told these things to the apostles." But the apostles had a hard time believing for the words seemed to them an idle tale. The last verse of our Gospel relates that Peter rose and ran to the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there and went home and marveled. We know from the Gospel of John that it was Mary Magdalene that told Peter and that both Peter and John went to the tomb. But there is plenty of surprise here for everyone. The greatest surprise was this: the body of Jesus was not where it was expected to be. Or was it? According to Jesus' own words, recalled by the angels, He was not supposed to be there on the third day for on the third day he was to rise.

III. Are You Surprised This Easter Sunday?

Are you surprised this Easter Sunday? At a time when it appears that many are not that inspired or motivated or enthused by much that has to do with their faith, that might be a good question. Of course, we cannot be as surprised as those faithful women were on the first Easter. But if they had not been surprised on that day and had found what they were looking for we would not be here this day. There would be no church building here on 54th and Washington Boulevard. There would be no churches anywhere. There would be no church period. As St. Paul writes in the epistle for this day: "If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." There would be no hope, no joy, no faith, no Easter. But with the women, with the apostles, with St. Paul, we can be surprised this day by the age old words: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep." As the first man Adam brought death through sin, so also Christ brings life. That is the victory of Easter that is the Easter surprise. For in Christ Jesus our Lord is the greatest victory of all—the victory over death and the grave. As Scripture says, "By his death he destroyed death and by his rising again he brought life and immortality to light." The grave could not hold him. Death had no power over him. What a glorious word of triumph for each of us.

Conclusion

In United States law there is a phrase called "habeas corpus." It is a Latin phrase that means "you have the body." It signifies a petition that anyone can make to determine whether a person is being held lawfully for a legitimate cause. On that first day of the week, that first

Easter morn, it was literally “non habeas corpus.” You do not have the body. And on that day in the hours to come the risen Lord would walk with his disciples and talk with them, he would eat with them and show them his hands and side—the wounds of his crucifixion. And above all he would say, “Peace be with you.” For he is our Easter surprise.

Weeping be gone; sorrow be silent
Death put asunder and Easter is bright.
Cherubim sing: “O grave, be open!”
Clothe us, in wonder, adorn us in light.
Jesus is risen and we shall arise:
Give God the glory. Alleluia.

Christ is risen.

Amen.