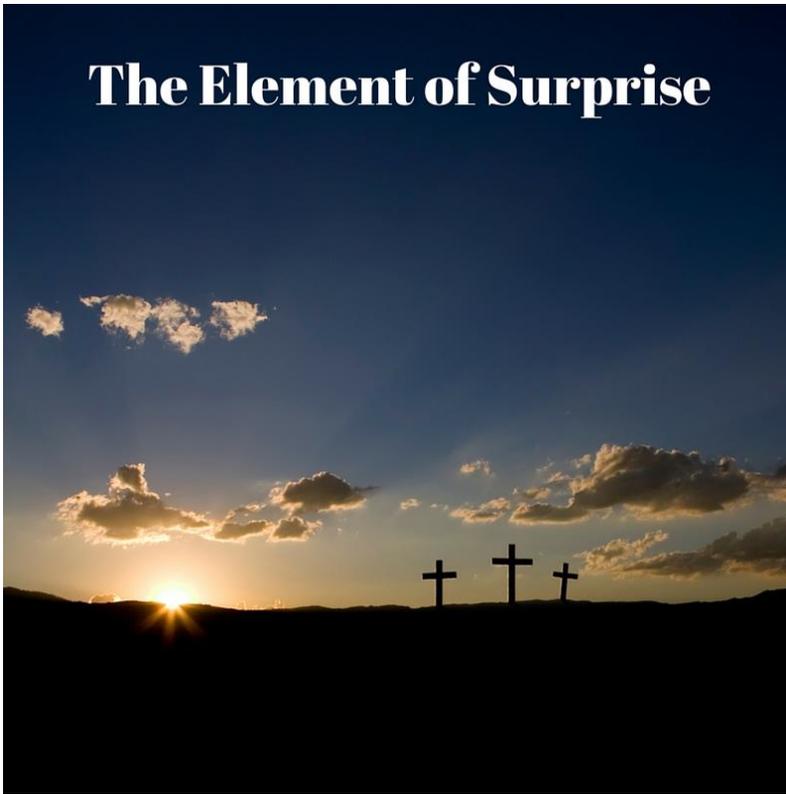


# The Element of Surprise



The Element of Surprise  
Text John 20:1-18, Isaiah  
Preached FCCW 3-27-2016

Three men who died appeared at the pearly gates of heaven  
and asked St. Peter for permission to enter.

St. Peter said to the first man

"All right, tell me what is Easter?"

The man replied, "Oh, that's the day that

some fellow discovered  
America."

Peter shook his head. "Sorry. Permission denied."

The second man stepped up, asking to enter, too.

St. Peter asked the same question, "What's Easter?"

This man replied,

"Oh, that's the day the fat jolly man

with the bag of toys comes  
around."

Peter sent him away, too.

The third man who came almost made it.

When St. Peter asked, "What's Easter?" he said:

"Easter? Isn't that the story about a man

who died and was buried,

and on the third day came alive,

rolled the stone back from his grave,

looked out and saw his shadow

then went back inside for six more weeks of winter?"

This Easter, more than most others,

this joke hits close to home.

If it feels like Groundhog Day was just yesterday,

and Easter feels way too early on the calendar this year,

you're right.

The truth is, Easter very rarely is  
as close to Groundhog Day as it is this year.

And, it's not because Groundhog Day has moved.

Easter has.

Easter always does.

Unlike most holidays, Easter does not have the same  
spot reserved for itself on the calendar each year.

Instead, Easter can fall anywhere from as early as March 22nd  
to as late as April 25th.

Which can make it seem like there is  
no logic to the dating of Easter.

Which is not exactly true, either.

Easter's date is always on the first Sunday  
after the first full moon  
after the Spring Equinox,  
which is March 20.

The dating of Easter is based on the Hebrew lunar calendar  
used to fix the date for the Jewish Passover,

because it was during Passover that Jesus  
was crucified and then resurrected.

That's a great dating system if your main concern  
is the preservation of historical accuracy.

But , it wreaks havoc with people who are obsessed with  
things like order and predictability.

Like this friend of mine, who is also a minister,  
and so whose life is definitely impacted by Easter.

A few years back, when Easter was even earlier than it is this year,  
he was so frustrated that he said he wished someone  
would just choose one date -- any date -- for Easter  
and keep it there!

I get where he is coming from.

Having a fixed date for Easter would mean  
no more consulting astronomical charts  
to know what time to schedule Sunrise Services.

No more having Easter sneak up on you  
in March instead of arriving in April.

But I believe that pinning down Easter  
to one day on the calendar  
would be the worst thing we could possibly do to it.

I don't think Easter was ever meant to be  
so predictable as that.

If anything, the outstanding feature of Easter  
seems to be the extreme opposite of predictability.

If anything, Easter is all about the element of surprise.

Life with Jesus was never predictable.

Life with Jesus always changed people's agendas.

Life with Jesus kept them guessing.

Why should Death with Jesus be any different  
than Life with him had always been?

The story of the empty tomb can be found in all four of the Gospels.

And though the basic story is the same,  
some of the details vary from one telling to another.

One thing is constant, though.

And that is that nothing happens in the way

that anybody would have predicted.

Beginning with Jesus' death.

Nobody could believe that the Messiah's life

could end the way his did,

even though Jesus flat out warned them

that once they got to Jerusalem

he would be betrayed and put to death,

but then be raised on the third day.

When Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James,

and the other women went early in the morning to the tomb

where his body was laid

when it was taken down from the cross,

that's where they expected to find it.

But much to their surprise, what they found instead was

the stone that sealed the tomb -- rolled away.

And what they didn't find --

was Jesus' body inside the tomb.

Oh, and there was a conversation with angels.

I bet no one saw that coming!

No wonder it says that after all this,  
the women were perplexed.

Perplexed is not how you feel when  
everything goes precisely according to your expectations.

When the women go back to tell the disciples  
what they found,  
and what they didn't find,  
it so boggles the men's minds that  
Peter races to the tomb to see for himself.

All the way, his mind was probably racing, too.  
Making a checklist of logical explanations for  
what the women had told them.

Maybe it was too dark in the tomb,  
or they were too hysterical with grief,  
and they didn't see him lying there.  
Maybe grave robbers had taken his body.

Instead he found Jesus missing, just as they said.

And, surprise! The carefully folded grave linens

that no grave robber would have been so neat  
or so careless  
to leave behind that way.

It says that after examining the scene  
at the tomb for himself,  
he went home, amazed at what had happened.

Which is just another way of saying he was just as clueless  
about what happened to Jesus' body  
after seeing the evidence with his own eyes  
as he was before he got there.

There was something wild and unpredictable  
about that morning.

And the days that followed.

Once he got out of that tomb,  
there was no telling where the Resurrected Jesus  
was going to turn up.

He was like a puppy that slips out of the house  
when someone forgets to shut the door tight.

Cavorting around the neighborhood,

enjoying its newfound freedom,  
you might see it romping about,  
greeting strangers and getting into places  
that he had no business being in.

Jesus had slipped out of death's hold over him,  
and he started showing up all over the place.

Later that same day he suddenly appears in a room  
where the disciples are hiding.  
Even though the door to the room was securely locked!

Then, a couple of travelers on the road to Emmaus  
are joined by a stranger who they don't know is Jesus  
until they recognize him when he breaks bread with  
them.

Just a few weeks afterward,  
the disciples are out in the boat fishing  
when they see someone on the beach  
cooking breakfast over a charcoal fire.  
Sure enough, it is Jesus again.

So, it is only fitting, isn't it, that Easter goes on  
springing up wherever it will,

with or without our being prepared for its arrival.

Never mind the eggs and baskets and lilies,  
or any of the other traditions that we use  
to get us in the spirit of Easter.

The one original, indispensable Easter tradition  
is the element of surprise.

And this surprise is bigger even  
than what happened to Jesus!

It's about what God has planned for you and me!

And not just what God has planned for us,  
but what God has planned for all of Creation!

In the Isaiah passage we hear God's voice say,  
"I am about to create new heavens and new earth."

The Resurrection of Jesus -- as incredible as that is to consider --  
is only the first step in God's plan to resurrect  
this whole hot mess of a universe.

Anglican author N. T. Wright puts it this way,  
"Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's new project

not to snatch people away from earth to heaven

but to colonize earth with the life of heaven.

"The message of Easter is that God's new world

has been unveiled in Jesus Christ

and that you're now invited to belong to it."

The defining quality of this New Creation will be

that all the things we think of as permanent facts of life

will be rendered relics of the past.

There will be no weeping and distress,

no lives lived in desperate futility

or children born for calamity.

The destiny God has in store for us

is so far from anything we could predict or even imagine,

that Isaiah can only attempt to describe it as a world

where wolves and lambs would graze

peaceably, side by side.

If we really want to capture the spirit of Easter,

you know what I think we should do?

Forget all this foolishness about

setting a fixed date for the holiday.

If anything, we ought to do something that affirms the utter unpredictability of Easter, like -- pin a calendar to the wall and throw a dart at it.

Wherever the dart hits, that's Easter for this year.

I can just imagine a scene like this:

church members getting a call at the crack of dawn from their minister.

"Get out of bed! Meet me in the park; we're going to have our Easter sunrise service in one hour! Christ is risen! Hallelujah!"

I mean, isn't that something like how it must have been for Peter and the disciples when the women who discovered the empty tomb banged on their door first thing in the morning with their incredible news?

Sound like a crazy idea? Maybe it is.

I doubt that it will ever catch on.

But can you think of a better way  
for Easter to keep us off balance  
the way it was meant to do?

But, since I don't see that happening,  
I guess we'll continue doing Easter as we always have.

Figuring its date according to the sun and the moon.

At least that way we can still be reminded  
that miracles like the Resurrection  
are governed in the heavens,  
not in our calendars.

If my friend's idea for setting a rigid date for Easter  
ever comes up for a vote, I know where I will stand.

I'll vote against doing anything that might diminish  
the element of surprise in Easter.

After all, Easter confronts us with  
the biggest surprise in the universe.

That the very thing we thought was certain  
- which is death -  
turns out to be no more of a sure thing

than Punxatawney Phil's predictions about winter.

Christ has risen!

So, be prepared to be surprised by him

showing up when and where you least expect him.

Expect to be perplexed.

Embrace the element of surprise.

Because as long as Easter is about being surprised

by God being up to something bigger and better

than anything we can imagine,

Easter will always be about hope.