

Full of Surprises

In the name of him who was slain and by his blood ransomed us a people for God, dear friends in Christ: Early on the first Easter morning the women went to the tomb in order to finish the customary Jewish burial preparations on the body of Jesus that had been hastily and incompletely performed the eve of the preceding Sabbath. As they walked along, they wondered how they were going to get the tomb open, for they had seen it sealed with a heavy stone – one they didn't think they'd have the strength to move. When they arrived however, they were surprised to find the tomb already open. And, as you know, that was probably the least of the surprises they had that day: first angels telling them that Jesus had risen, then Mary surprised to see the risen Lord, then Peter saying the same thing – that Jesus had appeared to him, followed some time later by the breathless Emmaus disciples just having run back to town to say that they had spent the whole afternoon talking with Jesus – and that they didn't even know it was him until the last second, and when they did he vanished in an instant. And then, of course, the biggest surprise of all: Jesus suddenly appearing in the room where they were all gathered. Yes, the first Easter was a day full of surprises for the followers of Jesus.

And so also were the days that followed. Take for instance the story we heard this morning about the miraculous catch of fish and the appearance of Jesus to his disciples at the Sea of Tiberius. It's pretty clear they weren't expecting what happened there. Then a few weeks later there was the Ascension: one moment Jesus is talking to his disciples, he gives them some final instructions, and then he starts rising up into the clouds. The disciples just stand there looking up with their mouths open. "Wow. Who saw that coming?" "Not me." Ten days later there was the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost, what with the powerful wind, the flames of fire on the disciples' heads, and the gift that enabled them to speak in other languages. Yes, Jesus had told them to expect something to happen; but I'm certain that they were still surprised when and how it did. Then too you had this fantastic explosion of growth in the church, and after that the spread of the Gospel to the Gentiles – something none of the first Jewish Christians could even imagine. So, the surprises of the first Easter just continued on one right after another. The disciples never knew what to expect next. It must have come to the point when they awoke each morning thinking, "I wonder what new and wonderful thing the Lord is going to do today?"

Or, to say it another way and as strange as it sounds, they must have come to expect to be surprised at God's work in the world. And if so they were growing in their understanding of the Lord himself because he is a God full of surprises. He consistently does things and operates in ways that are exactly the opposite of the way we think and expect. And this should be evident when considering the heart of the Gospel itself. I mean, think about it: the Lord looks down from on high at all the sinful rebellion mounting against him in the hearts of the people he created. They hate him and everything he stands for. He ought simply to wipe them all out in righteous anger and be done with it. Instead, he is moved by unfathomable love and compassion so that he sends his only-begotten Son to die for the sins of the world. It's beyond belief. I suppose we are so used to hearing it that it no longer astonishes us like it should; but it really is something completely unexpected. And from that, the biggest of all surprises, flow the many others that follow.

Several of which we see highlighted in this morning's reading from the book of Acts. There are four surprises in particular that I'd like to take under consideration. First, we have Saul on the road to Damascus. He thinks he understands God perfectly. He is a self-described Pharisee among Pharisees, someone who is super zealous for the Law of God. He has devoted himself entirely to the Lord's service and is convinced beyond any shadow of doubt that he is doing God's will. That's why he is working so hard to put down what he thinks of as the dangerous upstart cult of the crucified Nazarene named Jesus. Far too many people are being led astray by these heretics and it's his duty to stop them, to save them, to turn them back to the truth even at the threat of their lives if that's what it takes to stop this cancerous faith from spreading. And so effective has he been in doing this work of suppressing and persecuting Christians in Jerusalem that many of them have fled the city. Unfortunately, this has had the unintended consequence of causing their evil teachings to spread even more – it's like the cancer is metastasizing. It's in order to prevent the situation from getting worse that

he's gone to the High Priest to get a commission to go to Damascus, round up the Christians who have fled there, and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains before they can infect the synagogues of Syria and beyond.

This is his mindset as he approaches the city of Damascus. His target is now in sight and he entertains himself by thinking of all the ways he will cause his captives to suffer. He must make examples of them so that others will see and fear. It's what God wants – he knows it. And right about then is when he gets his big surprise. A flash of blinding light from heaven topples him into the dust, and he hears the voice of the resurrected Lord Jesus calling to him, "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Try to imagine how dumbfounded he would be at that moment. He's obviously experiencing something from beyond. He knows this is an encounter with the Divine; but, "Hey, I'm on your side – I'm your most loyal follower, aren't I?" It doesn't make any sense. He asks, "*Who* are you, Lord?" Then comes the blow that must have crushed him: "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting."

What do you suppose it would be like to suddenly have everything you were certain of proved wrong? What do you suppose it would do to you if you thought you were 100 percent in God's will and faithfully doing his bidding—only then to discover that you were instead actively campaigning against him, cursing his name, and that you were in fact fully on the side of Satan? And remember, Saul was a man who lived by the Law. Thoughts of God's mercy, grace, and forgiveness are as a foreign to him as Swahili is to you. He must have concluded that as a result of his actions he was about to be destroyed and cast down to the deepest pit of hell. He is told to get up, go into the city (which he now cannot see), and wait. "You will be told what you are to do." Ouch. That must have sounded pretty ominous. Saul's first surprise was the absolute overthrow of everything in his life.

The second surprise in this section that I'd like to point out concerns a citizen of Damascus named Ananias. He is probably a recent convert to Christ – made one by hearing the Gospel from the very refugees who came here to escape the persecution that Saul was so ruthlessly spearheading. Ananias knows all about Saul. He's heard the stories of arrests, beatings, confiscations, and so on. He knows what kind of hardships the Lord's people have suffered at Saul's hands. He's the enemy. And last Ananias has heard, Saul was coming here with the High Priest's authority and an armed escort to drag the same people who shared Christ with him back to prison and worse. Ananias, along with the entire Christian community here, as small and weak as it is, has been praying to be delivered from this evil man.

And now the Lord Jesus comes to him in a vision and says, "Ananias, I've got a job for you." "Sure, Lord, anything you want. Just name it." "Good, I want you to go to the house of Judas on Straight Street. There's a fellow named Saul there that I want you to take care of. He's praying to me right now. And I've given him a vision too, of you coming and restoring his sight, so he knows to expect you." And Ananias has got to be thinking, "Saul's blind now? Ha! That's great news. Serves him right. I guess our prayers are answered." So he starts arguing with Jesus. "Excuse me, Lord; but what, are you kidding? This Saul is bad news. He's been doing terrible things to your people in Jerusalem. And now he's here to take them back there in chains. You can't seriously want me to help him, can you?" "Oh, yes, Ananias. I've got big plans for him. He's going to carry my name to Gentiles, before kings, and to the people of Israel. And in the process, he's going to suffer from the same kinds of persecution he's been dishing out. So, go. Do what I tell you." That must have floored Ananias: that Jesus would pick as his most powerful and prolific spokesman a person who had dedicated his life to destroying Christianity.

But as astonished as he surely was, Ananias went as the Lord directed and found Saul who, as you recall, has spent an entire three days imagining himself on the death row of eternity. The question in his mind is not whether the Lord will consign him to the flames; but when and just how terrible it will be. He sits in darkness seeing only the pictures in his mind of what horrors await him. Each sound he hears startles him. "Will this be it? Is this when I'm going to get it?" He takes no food or drink. He can't. He just sits and waits for the hammer to fall. But strangely, it doesn't. He was certain that the Lord's retribution would be swift and terrible – and justly so ... but this waiting ... it's almost worse than whatever judgments are coming. And yet you see what the Lord is doing: he's using the combination of time and pressure to work on Saul and destroy in him the proud legalism he had built his life and reputation on. He's breaking him down to repentance precisely so that he can raise him up again in Christ. Saul comes at last to point of total despair so

that he casts himself completely on the Lord's mercy – and only then he is given the vision of a man named Ananias coming to his aid.

This vision seems too good to be true – but then it happens. Saul experiences firsthand the big surprise of the Gospel I mentioned earlier – that in Christ Jesus and his atoning death God is reconciling spiritually lost, blind, sinners to himself. Saul – his eyes now truly opened for the first time in his life – discovered that when he thought he was living for God, he was in fact digging himself deeper into hell; but that when he died to himself and his imagined good works, he was able to live through faith in Jesus. It was the last thing he would have expected; but there it was: God's infinitely surprising love and compassion through his Son. Ananias baptized Saul on the spot and the two former enemies became brothers in Christ.

Which leads us to the last surprise mentioned in the text. Imagine being a Jew in a Damascus synagogue. You know all about these troublesome Christians, and how they've fled here from Jerusalem to get away from the law. Some of them have even come in to our worship services with their message about Jesus – that is until we threw them out. Unfortunately, they have deceived many people in our midst with their lies about their false Messiah who was crucified and then, or so they say, rose from the grave. It's obviously a bunch of hogwash; the trouble is that it's dividing families. It's destroying the Jewish community here. It's got to be stopped. The good news is that this fellow named Saul is here now. He's been sent by our religious authorities to arrest the members of this cult and get them out of our hair. As a matter of fact, he's going to be speaking today at our synagogue – probably to reveal the dark secrets of this sect and to tell us how we can help him to identify, round up, and get rid of these scoundrels.

So Saul gets up to speak. He reads aloud several passages of Scripture and then begins to explain how they are all about Jesus of Nazareth, and how he is God's Son and the long-expected Messiah sent to save the world from sin. Jaws must have hit the floor. Here was Saul eloquently proclaiming the very faith he had been sent to destroy. And the funny thing is that Saul had a letter from the High Priest that gave him the authority to speak at all the synagogues in Damascus about Jesus – it just ended up being used differently than the High Priest intended. That must have been quite a surprise for him when he found out about it.

But my whole point this morning is that Easter and the season that follows is a time of surprises. And since we are living as followers of Jesus in the post Easter period, we can and should expect that God has surprises for each of us. I mentioned before that the disciples must have approached each day wondering what new and surprising thing God was going to do next. What I would encourage you to do today is to capture that same sense of anticipation. God does amazing things through the power of his Gospel – things we do not expect.

What am I talking about? Let's talk about sin. Each of us has certain areas that we struggle with – places in our lives that are still in full blown rebellion against God. We tell ourselves, "I'll never get over this. I can't change. This is my weakness; I just have to live with it. Surely God understands." Nonsense. That's the spiritual and moral equivalent of harboring a murderer in your home – one that plans to kill you in your sleep. And you can change – though not by your own effort. God will have to do it. But if he could change the murderous Saul to his side, then he can certainly change your heart – and with precisely the same means: the death of repentance and the washing away of your sin through Jesus. Turn it over to him and you will be surprised at what happens.

Or how about that certain someone (or some-ones) you just can't seem to get along with? You tell yourself, "We will be enemies for life." Really? That's what Ananias thought about Saul. Whoops. Guess he was wrong. Could it be that you are too? Or how about that person you want to share the Gospel with; but just can't seem to find the right words or the most opportune moment. Maybe you've written that person off as one who will never come to faith in Jesus. Maybe you've convinced yourself there is nothing you can do to help. Don't be so certain. God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus to lost sinners is able to do amazing things. In fact, you should expect it. And expecting it, you should cooperate and participate with it so that you can be part of making God's surprising things happen.

They will. You can count on it; because, as we've seen, he is a God full of surprises for those who live by faith in the biggest surprise of all: the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the life we have in him. Expect to be surprised. You will be. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!