

It Should not have been a Surprise

It was the third day, and the women were showing their love for Jesus by going out to finish the anointing of Jesus' body. They had forgotten that they would need help to remove the stone from the tomb. They had forgotten something more important. Jesus had foretold that He would rise on the third day.

The angel told the women to stop being amazed, and showed them the place where Jesus' body had been lying. It was the place that provided the greatest hope and future joy that this world has had since the fall into sin. The angel told them explicitly that Jesus had risen, and gave them the task of telling Jesus' disciples that He would meet them in Galilee. However, they did not leave the tomb with relief and elation. "They were trembling and bewildered; and they said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid" (Mk 16:8). They had heard Jesus' words earlier about Himself, but had still not recognised Him as the Son of the living God, and the One who would conquer sin and death. Perhaps they thought, "Well, perhaps, some day!"

The disciples of Jesus appeared in even worse light. They had been with Him over three years or so, hearing His teaching, and His predictions. When Mary Magdalene reported that she had seen Jesus, they did not believe her. (Mk 16:11). When the women reported that they had seen angels at the tomb, and that the tomb was empty, the disciples thought they were talking nonsense (Lk 24:11). In spite of what Mary Magdalene had told him, John admitted that he had not gone to the tomb expecting a resurrection. He said that he did not yet understand the Old Testament Scriptures, which foretold that the Messiah would rise from the dead (Jn 20:9). When the two disciples who lived at Emmaus went back and reported what they had seen to the rest of them, but they did not believe them either (Mk 16:13). The resurrection of Jesus took them completely by surprise.

Even during the suffering of Jesus on the cross there were events that should have prepared Jesus' followers to expect that Jesus' death would not be the lamentable end of the life's work of this very unusual teacher. One of the thieves believed that Jesus' death would not be the end. He certainly thought that that day would bring his own end. He did not expect great things that very day. He believed, in spite of all the mockery around the cross, that at some time in the future Jesus would nevertheless come into His kingdom. He did not ask to be raised again, but only to be remembered. Jesus replied that on that day he would be with Him in paradise. That included coming to life again after death, even if it did not refer to Jesus' body or to the third day or to his own body. There is an aspect of God's kingdom that it is present with human beings before they realise it (Mt 12:28). It will be like that too when Jesus comes to take people to His glorious kingdom. He will come when people do not expect Him to come.

The account of Jesus' resurrection stresses that for everyone the event was unexpected. The reports in this respect do not present us with an encouraging pattern to follow.

Then there was the confession of the Roman officer who had charge over the three crucifixions. He said, "Truly, this man was the Son of God!" (Mt 27:54). Even if, out of the twelve disciples, John was the only one who was present at the cross, he should have reported that to the other disciples. If Jesus really was the Son of God, as they had themselves confessed in quieter times, they should have expected that this would not be the end for Jesus.

None of them should have been surprised. Early in His ministry they had heard Jesus predict that He would rebuild the temple of His body in three days (Jn 2:19-21). He had given three explicit predictions that He would be raised on the third day (Mt 16:21; 17:23; 20:19). They had heard Jesus say that no sign would be given to the unbelieving class of people of His day except the sign of Jonah, whose deliverance from the large fish on the third day was a picture of His own resurrection (Mt 12:39). They had heard Jesus say that He had the authority to take up His life again after He had laid it down (Jn 10:17-18).

We know ourselves so well that we understand this fleshly stupor in the disciples. It is the nature of human beings who are oppressed by sin to sleep. If we hear a creak in a wooden house we know that it will eventually collapse. We console ourselves that at least it will not collapse immediately. We hear that earthquakes will be among the long-range signs that this world will not continue for ever. Yet a week after reports of the earthquake in Turkey, Iran, Algeria, and elsewhere we have become complacent again. Jesus has said that He will come again, like a thief in the night. How seriously to do take His words?

The Gospel itself always has this element of what is unexpected. It has no logical connection with human merit. As we read the Old Testament prophets we see sections of judgment, threats, and condemnation. Then we are surprised by messages of sheer, undeserved promises of forgiveness and restoration. There is no connection between the guilt and unworthiness of the people and God's unconditional readiness to forgive and promise blessing. We hear the Gospel message of deliverance from sin and death, and we receive the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper, the most precious things that we have. Some people do not think that they need the Lord's Supper very often. They put forward the excuse that it is too precious to receive it often. They do not think that, by the same reasoning, they would then expect to hear the Gospel only rarely, because that, too, is most precious. Are we hearing the Gospel and receiving the Sacrament with the same thrill of wonder, hope, and joy that the message of Jesus' unexpected resurrection should mean for us?

The resurrection of Jesus is one of the greatest incentives we have to spread the Gospel message. During His ministry Jesus had often told people to keep His identity as the Messiah quiet. In areas like Galilee particularly He told people whom He healed not to spread the news. Jesus had even told His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ. After His transfiguration He had told the three disciples not to tell anyone about it until after He had risen from the dead (Mk 1:43-44; 5:43; 8:29-30; 9:9). However, when Jesus rose the time of messianic secrecy had come to an end. Then His whole life and the purpose of His ministry could be understood. The resurrection has changed all need for secrecy. Therefore we should take to heart Jesus' rebukes about unbelief and hardness of hearts.

If disciples of Jesus who had heard His teaching time after time for about three years were still caught unawares and

Jesus' death had dashed all their hopes, we must watch ourselves, too. We dare not react to our repeated hearing of the Gospel and reception of the Lord's Supper with a spiritual "Ho hum! What's new?"

After His resurrection Jesus commissioned His disciples to preach the Gospel openly to all, and we also have that commission (Mk 16:15). Although Paul still called the Gospel a mystery, it was no longer a secret. God's plan, which had been hidden from ages past, had been revealed. The secret is out, and we have the duty to tell others about it. The open secret included God's plan to embrace the Gentiles among God's chosen people. Do we really believe these things and show that we believe it by passing the message along? The fact of Jesus' resurrection should affect the joy and expectation with which we hear the Gospel and receive the life-giving Sacrament. It should also impel us to overcome our sinful stupor and preoccupation with lesser things to speak out the truth that people need to hear from us for their sakes.

The stone has been rolled away. We come to church to hear again the thrilling message about the empty tomb. We have heard it often. We must watch ourselves that we do not react with an unspoken "Ho hum!" It should not be something that we think about only on Easter morning, when we affirm, "He is risen indeed!" It is not something that should occupy our thoughts only when we are sad about the loss of the friend or relative. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead should be the incentive to speak confidently the kinds of words that Paul used: "God did this so that through the church His many-sided wisdom might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. This was according to His eternal purpose, and He carried it out in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Him, by believing in Him, we are bold, and can confidently approach God" (Eph 3:10-12).

Combating our lethargy includes coming to grips with indifference and unbelief in people around us who are complacent about the clear truth of the Scriptures that Jesus will return to judge and take believers to eternal glory with Him, and banish unbelievers to eternal torment in hell. At the time of the flood and in Sodom and Gomorrah people were concentrating on their planting, building, and getting married, and were oblivious to their impending doom. The end of the world in fire will catch many people unawares when they should have known better. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead tells us that we ought to believe it, and it should startle us to the point that we are genuinely concerned that others who are complacent should wake up. This is no idle tale!