

“Surprise!”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 27, 2014**

**New Testament Lesson: Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20
Old Testament lesson: Psalm 118:19-24**

Did y'all see the Resurrection last week? Actually, they didn't show it. Oh, I mean the TV show Resurrection; for some reason it wasn't on during Easter Week. You've not heard of the show? Well, I don't know that you're missing much, but the network describes it like this: "The people of Arcadia, Missouri, are forever changed when their deceased loved ones suddenly start to return. An 8-year-old American boy wakes up alone in China with no idea how he got there. Details start to emerge when the boy, who calls himself Jacob, recalls that his hometown is Arcadia, and an Immigration agent takes him there. The home he claims as his own is occupied by an elderly couple, Henry and Lucille Langston, who lost their son, Jacob... more than 30 years ago." In other words, Jacob died and now it appears he might be back, him and now several other people from Arcadia who had died, two of them friends of town's preacher. The TV show invites us to wonder what it would be like if your loved ones actually came back to life unchanged after 30 years and picked up where things left off. Of course for those who went on living, years have gone by and they are older. Some of them have moved on, some better than others. And for the loved ones who have returned – if that's really what is happening here – they struggle to fit into a world where, for them, years have gone by in the blink of an eye and they're still the same; like that 8-year-old boy. Or are they?!? Ooooooo....

And here we are; one week has gone by since we celebrated the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, and we're still the same. Or are we? Are any of us struggling to fit into a world where Easter Week has gone by in the blink of an eye and we are still the same! Christ is risen, he is risen indeed, and what difference did it make?

Of course we have salvation because of what Jesus did for us on the cross. We have the promise of eternal life because of what God did for us in that tomb – raising Jesus in power and glory. But I mean, today, what difference does that make for us today?

For the earliest followers of Jesus, only three days had gone by after his death when they experienced the resurrection. And for them it meant surprise and fear and wonder and joy. "He has been raised from the dead," the angel says, "and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him." And hearing this, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary "left the tomb quickly," says Matthew, "with fear and great joy."

How did you leave here last week, or wherever it was you celebrated Easter, experienced the Resurrection of the Lord? “Suddenly,” says Matthew, “Jesus meets them and says, ‘Greetings!’ And they come to him, take hold of his feet, and worship him.” What would you do in response to a greeting from the risen Lord? What have you done, given that the Lord indeed is risen, there for us each day, to greet us and direct our lives?

When the eleven disciples met the risen Lord in Galilee, they worshipped him; but, says Matthew, some doubted. I wonder what that looked like in the eyes of Jesus. As the risen Lord, to see his closest followers hesitate to embrace him, hesitate to follow where he leads. I wonder if Jesus sees that in us – the hesitation, the reluctance to follow his way.

You were each given an envelope by the ushers today. Did anyone not receive one? Raise your hand. While they’re getting their envelopes, the rest of us, imagine what you might find in there. It says “Surprise;” what kind of surprise awaits us?

Imagine this is the tomb of Jesus and you are a disciple about to peer inside. OK, everyone, open your envelope. What did you find? Tell your neighbor what you found in your envelope. How did it make you feel to find that in there? Go ahead, do that now for a few moments. I’ll wait. OK, OK, let’s come back together.

Let me tell you what you found in your envelopes. Some of you found nothing! You were promised a surprise and found nothing. How did that make you feel – a little let down, maybe at a loss for what’s going on, what it all means? Others of you found a toy – a trinket. How did that make you feel? Does that toy or trinket really measure up to your expectations? Is it even really worth keeping?

And then there are those who found a note – a slip of paper with a challenge to go out into the world sometime this week and do something on behalf of Jesus. Now how did that make you feel – excited, energized, maybe a little afraid or hesitant? Are you going to do it? Do you even know if you will? Can you image what that would be like? What it might mean for you, for the other person, for the world to do something this week on behalf of Jesus? Any of you? All of us? This is the choice – or circumstance – that each of the disciples faced on that first Easter week 2,000 year ago when they first heard about the empty tomb. Peering into the tomb, in their heart of hearts, did they see just an empty hole in the ground?

Or maybe for some it was a neat idea – Jesus risen from the dead – but in the end it didn’t amount to much. Oh, they enjoyed toying with the idea, but it never really changed their lives.

And then for others among the earliest followers, there were these words from Jesus: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." Wow! What if that's what you found waiting for you in the empty tomb!

Well, it is. For all of us, the risen Lord emerges from the Easter tomb which some hoped would be his end, and he says, "Oh no ... this is just the beginning!" And you –we- are just the ones to begin it for him.

The truth of it is that we all have been given a slip of paper from Jesus with a challenge on. Each of us is called to go out into the world everyday, and particularly sometime this week, go out and do something on behalf of the risen Lord.

For those who rise to the challenge, there truly is a wonderful surprise awaiting you – maybe a little scary, you might be a little hesitant. But that's OK. Because Jesus is there with you, to inspire you, encourage you, and bless you in reaching out on his behalf.

For anyone who doesn't embrace Jesus' call upon our lives, well, I imagine life can be pretty empty; like that envelope was for some of you. For others, life can be trivial, like the toy or trinket in some of your envelopes.

But the good news is that no matter what was in the envelope you received, we all have been given the same opportunity to do something on behalf of Jesus, and to do something this week in particular. Because there's no time like the present, and it's always the present.

Those of you who got nothing in your envelope, pick up a slip of paper from the basket on the credenza in the Parlour before you go. For those who got a trinket, turn it in for a chance to really be blessed this week by the risen Lord, as you bless the life of someone else. And if you got a slip of paper that just isn't you, pick one that speaks to your heart from the basket in the Parlour.

We all come away from the empty tomb with some experience or another. Depending on what that experience is for you – and what you are willing to do about – well, that will make all the difference in the world. And really, isn't that what we're called to do as Christians – to make a difference in the world, a positive difference, on behalf of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. What difference will you make this week?

Pastoral Prayer

Today, O God, help us to remember Jesus, the One who taught with divine authority. In his story, may we find our authority. Remind us of your great purposes and intentions throughout history.

Fix our hearts on the place where true joys are to be found; unclutter our minds from their comfortable confusions. Teach us how to get to clarity and move out in service to Christ, in Christ, to all God's people, one step by one little step at a time.

Let us live in the light of your resurrection and banish darkness and death from our door. Let us be free of fear and free for life.

In the name of the One who was raised from the dead, the one who taught us the way, the one who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we forgive
our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**