

## **Audacious Surprise of Resurrection**

I recently read about a man who made a last-minute trip without telling anyone to Australia to visit a friend. His neighbors missed him, grew worried and called the police, who broke down his door only to find that he had disappeared, leaving no evidence of what had happened to him.

A few weeks later, a death notice appeared in the local paper for a man by the same name who also was about the same age and who also happened to have two brothers by the same names as his brothers.

Friends and neighbors concluded that their worst fears had been realized. That is, until one of them received a postcard, confirming that, while he was indeed Down Under, it wasn't in the way they had thought. He arrived home from Australia to find his front door smashed in and police watching his home. Neighbors, seeing him, believed he must be a ghost.

Everywhere he went people grabbed him, saying, I thought you were dead! They couldn't believe it was him and that he was still alive. He said he was a nervous wreck because everywhere he went people keep grabbing and touching him!

That's the way it is when someone returns from Down Under! Jesus himself experienced a similar reception when he, returned from the down under of the grave — except that his friends and neighbors had actually seen him die.

The events of that Friday left Jesus' disciples, his closest friends and his casual acquaintances shocked at the brutal, painful and shameful way that he had died on a cruel Roman cross. But it wasn't as if Jesus hadn't told them where he was going. Unlike the man I read about, Jesus was very clear that he was going to the cross and the grave. In fact, Jesus had given them his fateful itinerary three times but **“they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said” (Luke 18:34).**

But they were surprised, then, to find the tomb door open, the flat stone of his resting place empty and no indication of Jesus' whereabouts on that Sunday morning. **Matthew even says that the guards who had been assigned to watch the place had no clue (Matthew 27:62-66).** Jesus was dead and his body presumed missing.

It was the angelic messengers who provided a postcard description of his whereabouts. . **“He is not here, but has risen,” they said, and then reminded the women of his plans (Luke 24:1-12). Two disciples traveling on the road to Emmaus got the same reminder, only to find that it was the risen Jesus himself who was telling them (Luke 24:13-26).**

Now gathered together in Jerusalem, with the anxiety, grief and wonder of the last three days on their minds, all the disciples and friends of Jesus tried to sort out the evidence. But then, suddenly, there he was among them saying, **“Peace be with you” (Luke 24:36)**. Like the perplexed and astounded neighbors of the man I read about, **the disciples thought they were seeing a “ghost” (v. 37)**. Death is a trip from which no one is supposed to return, so it’s little wonder that the disciples were “frightened” and that even **“in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering” (vv. 39, 41)**. Yet, unlike Michael, Jesus had no problem with people grabbing on to him to see if he was real. **“Touch me and see,” he said to his incredulous friends, “for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (v. 39)**. Luke makes it clear that this was no projection of imagination or collective fantasy. **The risen Jesus was touchable and even hungry, asking his friends for a little fish from the grill (vv. 41-43)**.

These physical details about Jesus’ resurrection appearances are offered by Luke to help everyone understand that his disciples would carry an audacious surprise of resurrection into the world. The “good news” the disciples preached was focused on the pivotal events of his death and resurrection. The risen Jesus, wiping the crumbs of fish off the table, reminded them that they were dealing with a real resurrected person in whose name **“repentance and forgiveness” would be proclaimed “to all nations beginning from Jerusalem” (v. 47)**.

Later, in the book of Acts, Luke tells us that the disciples insisted that Jesus was alive, that his death and resurrection had ushered in the new age when God would set a fallen world to rights. They understood that they were to continue to be his scarred hands and feet, feeding a world hungry for the hope of salvation, wholeness and the promise of new life made possible by his sacrificial death and bodily resurrection. They hadn’t seen a ghost or a resuscitated corpse but witnessed something utterly new, surprising and overwhelmingly joyful. No matter how bizarre their story seemed to be and no matter how much the prevailing powers tried to crush their movement, they continued to be “witnesses” to the reality of resurrection.

His death had been an essential part of the journey but He had returned in amazing triumph. Because of him, death is no longer the final destination. **The audacious surprise of his resurrection was the sign of hope**. Admittedly, it was difficult for the disciples to realize and it is still difficult for us to realize today for one very simple reason. We are overwhelmed by the preponderance of bad news. In fact I might add that many of us right here this morning may actually be addicted to bad news and not even aware of it.

As an illustration I want to share something my wife, Muff pointed out to me the other evening. We had just finished watching some bad news on the TV which was followed by a show featuring dirt on popular personalities. She blurted out, “Don, you don’t realize how unusual you are for you never spend a minute of your time watching such a show. Do you realize millions of people watch this?” “You have got to be kidding,” I exclaimed and thanked her for helping me realize how big this problem really is. I bring

this up not to suggest that I am above bad habits and certainly not to implicate TV but to illustrate that we may be overwhelmed by the preponderance of bad news. It has a terrible effect on us. It's like watching the stock market day after day. It gets to us and keeps us down. Listening to bombastic and accusatory people desensitizes us to the audacious surprises of the resurrection. Let me further explain.....

The other Sunday one of our adult Sunday School classes discussed Afghanistan. The class seemed to end up with little hope for Afghanistan and other countries with similar problems and with a concern that we as well as other free countries may be terrorized. Some members of the class put a positive spin on the discussion but it was still devastating. It was noted that as long as the focus is on losers and winners everyone seems to lose. It was also noted that individuals need to be able to realize and use their own spiritual gifts. And finally it was also noted that the United Nations seems unable to lead and guide the nations of the world. This made me begin to wonder how we might recover the audacious surprise of the resurrection in our world today.

I then read the epistle lesson for this morning which reminds us that the risen Christ is among us in the Spirit and will return to us in his resurrection body to finish the work he began. The writer offers a word of encouragement and motivation with these words: **“Beloved we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he [Jesus] is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have their hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).** We are therefore to come “looking for the living among the dead” - looking for the audacious surprise of resurrection.

Just recently, I noticed an illustration in our local news paper about a nine-year-old boy named **Samuel De Los Santos** who heard that the Ray of Hope Mission Center in the western part of our county was in trouble. He learned that donations were down 80%, the weekly free lunch program had been closed and the center was struggling to provide food for the families and individuals. He asked what he could do to help. Together with his mother and grandmother, Samuel decided to ask his neighbors if they would donate food. He gave his neighbors bags in which they might give groceries with a flyer explaining he would pick them up. He went to 15 homes on his street. “I didn’t know how much we would get,” he said. “I thought not everyone would do it, but a lot of them did.” While he was helping the needy, Samuel also got to meet some neighbors for the first time. His mother said the experience was good for her oldest child. “He’s very shy,” she said. Samuel and his mother returned to their neighbor’s houses several days later and were greeted with full bags. “We got lots and lots of cans,” he said. Peeking from the bags were pasta, peanut butter, cereal, spaghetti sauce, baby food, taco kits and macaroni and cheese. Rinaldi at the Ray of Hope said it was enough to feed 10 families. There were cash donations, too. Samuel’s grandmother went to a warehouse and bought cases of family-sized jars of peanut butter and pasta sauce. “I’m proud of you,” Rinaldi, the Ray of Hope Director told Samuel, “You did a great job.” The young man, who wants to be a K-9 police officer when he grows up, said he might just do a food drive again. “This makes me feel good,” he said. His unclouded vision of the possibilities and potential made the difference. In the midst of hunger and disarray he made a difference. As Jesus

said, **“let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs” (Luke 18:16)** and I commend the Cecil Whig for printing this story which illustrates Jesus’ resurrection of hope in our county. And there are many more examples of audacious surprise of resurrection that give us hope on the eastern side of our county right here in our own community and church.

This second illustration of Jesus resurrection as a sign of hope in our world today is more international in scope and may be considered controversial because it could be construed to be an endorsement of a political party but I hope not because it is offered as an endorsement of The President of our United States, **Barak Obama**, who in his first speech as president in a Muslim-majority country reached out to Muslims worldwide, stating that "the United States is not, and never will be, at war with Islam." In his remarks, made before the Turkish Parliament, Obama also stressed the need for a broader engagement with the Muslim world – an engagement that goes beyond joint counter-terrorism efforts and that is based on mutual respect and mutual interests.

Obama also gave a nod to the contributions of American Muslims to his own country and pointed out that many non-Muslim Americans, like himself, "have Muslims in their family, or have lived in a Muslim-majority country."

President Obama also held a town hall meeting with Turkish students, where he again emphasized many of the same themes. He said **“I believe we can have a dialogue that’s open, honest, vibrant, and grounded in respect. And I want you to know that I’m personally committed to a new chapter of American engagement. We can’t afford to talk past one another, to focus only on our differences, or to let the walls of mistrust go up around us”** It takes a person strong in the faith of Jesus Christ to open the doors to dialogue with people of other faiths. And this is what President Barak Obama has done. Such faith prompted by the Jesus of resurrection enables leaders like him to offer hope to the world. It is the kind of world I want to live, in how about you? Jesus said, **“With God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26)**. The resurrection of Jesus makes it all possible for he gives hope all over the world in every situation and circumstance all the time.

About a month ago we held our first Annual Elkton Men’s Weekend Gathering, “Come and Be Set Free”. It was near the conclusion of the weekend when this **group picture** was taken. You may have seen the picture in our newsletter but had you noticed that the men were wearing crosses? The crosses had been made ahead of time by one of the participants and quietly given to each man at the beginning of the weekend. No one was told to wear the crosses but for some reason when this picture was taken the men were wearing them. I was particularly struck by this because I am very reticent to wear a cross. It reminds me too much of the torture and death of Jesus which evokes deep emotions within me. As I have had time to think about the men wearing the crosses I have come to believe that it was because we had all received acceptance, support and comfort in not being alone but walking together. Jesus had walked this lonely road all by himself and every man there had made the decision by himself to walk it but we were no longer alone. We had been set free to walk inseparable and close together. It is remarkable that men can with God’s help have this experience but of course so can each one of us. As a

reminder of this I am placing this cross around my neck and over my heart on behalf of everyone present. It is a reminder of the **audacious surprise of resurrection** through Jesus. He has risen. He has risen indeed and He has given us new hope. So be it. **Amen!**