

*But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men stood by them in dazzling apparel. And as they were frightened and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." And they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Mary the mother of James and the other women with them who told these things to the apostles, but these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter rose and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; and he went home marveling at what had happened.*

By definition, a surprise is something you didn't see coming. Things are normal, until the moment that they aren't. Whether the surprise is bad or good, you can remember life before the big twist in the tale, and the bigger the twist, the bigger the impact.

The passage you just listened to from Luke's gospel is stuffed with surprises, or maybe it would be better to say that the surprises are stacked one on top of the other. One of those layers contains the ultimate surprise; a shocking twist unsurpassed by anything that has ever happened. But the surprises that surround it are remarkable in their own right, sending the message that the day described by Luke, the day that brings us here this Sunday, was a day of staggering wonder.

It begins with a group of women, bringing aromatic spices to the tomb of Jesus. Perhaps it's surprising that they would make this early trip at all; in their grief, they understandably wanted to honor Jesus in his death, but one wonders how they thought they would gain access to his body. "We'll figure it out when we get there" may have been the plan—a plan that turned out to be irrelevant, as they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. And that may have seemed like a pleasant surprise at first—problem solved, access granted—until they file inside. Jesus' body is gone. It simply is not there.

Even as they were running through scenarios that would explain a missing body, all of them deeply troubling, the next shock began to unfold. Out of nowhere, two men in dazzling garments appear. As if that were not enough to process, they have a message to deliver. In fact, they're going to explain what's going on. First, they ask an almost playful question: Why do you seek the living among the dead? Imagine the confusion the women must've felt. The living? That couldn't be Jesus. They had watched as Jesus' dead body was placed in the tomb. But now his corpse was missing, and nothing could prepare them for what these brilliant messengers were about to say. "He is not here, but has risen." There could be no doubt about who they meant. They were claiming Jesus had risen, but what in the world did that mean?

Yet another surprise: the women were about to hear a sermon, preached by angels. It was an invitation to search their memories—to recall the words of Jesus. "Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men and be crucified and on the third day rise." The women are invited to remember that Jesus

had predicted both his death and his return on the third day. They had walked right into the fulfillment of His prediction, which leads to another layer of surprise—they did remember. In the middle of an experience that would challenge anyone’s ability to concentrate, they remembered Jesus’ words. They remembered, though it had made no sense at the time, that He had talked about this very thing. Jesus was always telling amazing stories, but surprise, surprise; in this case He had been very direct. “On the third day rise” meant “get up out of your tomb alive again.”

Their remembrance of Jesus’ words led to an immediate twist in their own lives; they became messengers themselves, abruptly leaving the scene of the tomb, on a mission to tell what they had seen and heard. They had to find the eleven and the others, to share the astonishing news. But when they did, they encountered the most disappointing surprise of the day: their report was disregarded as nonsense. These eleven men, in whom Jesus had invested so much time and attention and patience, dismissed their eyewitness account as unbelievable. This was a crucial moment. Relationships of trust were on the line. Is this how it was going to end, with Jesus’ followers accusing each other of making up stories? No. There is room for one more stunning development. Peter, good old Peter, still reeling from his unthinkable triple denial of Jesus, suddenly gets up and starts running. He takes off in the direction of the tomb, driven to know the truth for himself.

That Sunday started with one surprise after another. It was a day of staggering wonder—a day on which the impossible became possible—the day on which death stopped meaning what it had always meant. It wasn’t the end anymore—if Jesus was alive again. And so I have to ask, what is your reaction to the news of an empty tomb and a living Lord? Are you stunned? Perplexed? Does it strike you as a surprise, or, to be candid, have you heard it so often that it’s lost its shock value? Is this message just one element of a daylong blur of family festivities, or is it a bolt of lightning to your soul? If you’re really kind of comfortable with the resurrection—if there’s no jolt, no explosion—I urge you to remember that Jesus predicted both his death and his rising and the time frame in which it would happen, and it happened, just as He said. And here’s the thing; he did all that so that you could join Him in resurrected life! He did it for you to share it with you. New life today, free from the fear of death; Endless life in a body like Jesus. Created by Jesus and yours by faith. The resurrection still means “get up out of your tomb alive again.” I’m talking about your tomb. Your grave. Wherever they scatter your ashes. Alive again in your connection to Jesus.

And if, truth be told, you have questions; you’re skeptical of these ancient claims; you consider the story of the women to be idle talk; I plead with you to run to the tomb like Peter. I can’t get that image out of my head this Easter, of the fisherman running out to see what happened. Luke doesn’t tell us why Peter took off; was it hope; just a shred of ‘what if it’s true’? Was he trying to prove the women wrong? Luke doesn’t say, and it really doesn’t matter. He ran to see for himself. Will you do the same? Will you dare to investigate this for yourself, not taking anyone else’s word for it? Will you dare to look into the tomb of Jesus? If so, you may be in for the *surprise* of your life.