

“Beyond the Edge of the Map”
Luke 24:1-12/Isaiah 65:17-25
April 4, 2010-Easter Sunday-FPC
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I. Introduction and Text

Try as we might to have everything figured out.....everything tied down.....everything planned and programmed, the unexpected happens. Life continues to be filled with surprises. If you doubt that, spend a day with a preschooler.....or a teenager.

One day last week the news reported that police officers in Cleveland were involved in a car chase. The chase spanned several communities and two interstate freeways. When traffic at an intersection stopped the fugitive, Ricky Flowers, jumped out of the car, and fled on foot. Police then chased him down streets and alleys, across backyards, and over fences.

When Ricky Flowers ran down one alley he came to a dead end, with a ten foot high chain link fence in front of him. With police officers running after him, he acted on impulse, and climbed the fence.

This is when the surprise happened. When Ricky Flowers jumped down to the ground off the fence he landed in..... a prison yard.....a women’s prison yard to be exact. Alarms immediately went off, and Ricky Flowers was immediately arrested. Evidently it is easier to get into a prison over a fence than out. The prisoners in the yard were surprised. Prison guards were surprised. The police officers in chase were surprised. But, of course, most of all, Ricky Flowers was surprised..

Surprises happened. The unexpected still sometimes happens. Life is still serendipitous.

Easter is a surprise. It was a surprise the first Easter. And when we get past the familiar words and story, it’s still a surprise today. Listen for the surprises.

Read Luke 24:1-12.

II. Brief Exegesis

(v. 1) It’s the first light of morning. The streets are still quiet. But a small group of women are up and walking together in the stillness of the morning. They whisper to each other, and hurry along. They are not from Jerusalem. They are from up north.....from the Galilee area. They have come to Jerusalem as pilgrims.....pilgrims to celebrate Passover.....pilgrims with Jesus.

But somehow things went terribly bad. The celebration of Passover had become the tragedy of Jesus' crucifixion. With heavy hearts, grief and tears they were up with the first light of morning to do the one thing they could do; anoint the dead body of Jesus with a few spices. It was one, final honor they could show him. In the stillness of the morning they expected a tomb, a dead body, and the sorrow of death.

(vv. 2-3) But when they got there they found some things that were... surprising. There was the stone in front of the tomb, but it had been rolled away from the entrance. The tomb was now open. And there was the tomb, carved into the side of a hill. But when they looked inside, it was empty. The burial cloths were there, but no body. Mmmmm? They set the spices down. This was a surprise. They didn't know what to do.

(vv. 4-8) The surprises were about to get bigger. Words are strained to tell the story. As the women whispered to each other, two men appeared. Had they been there, or had they just arrived.....the women didn't know. But they did know there was a bright shine about them.....and air shined with the glory of God. Surprise gave way to astonishment.....and fear. This just doesn't happen.....but it was happening.

The men spoke. There was surprise in their voices. "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The women were confused. What did that mean?

Seeming to understand their confusion, the other man spoke; "He is not here, but has risen." What? How could that be? The tomb was empty....but raised....living again? This just doesn't happen.

"Remember" one of the men said. "Remember when you were with Jesus in Galilee. Remember when he said that he would be arrested, crucified, and on the third day rise again. Remember." Their minds began to race back to Galilee.....back to those days with Jesus....back to his teaching. And yes, one by one, they began to remember. They remembered Jesus saying; betrayal, death, and resurrection. But could it be? Could it really happen? They remembered.....and a small flame of belief was lit.

(vv. 9-12) When they left the tomb, they went to find Jesus' other followers. The women told them about the stone. They told them about the empty tomb. They told them about the men and the shine of holiness and glory. They told them the message, "He is not here, but has risen." They told them to remember Jesus' own words about his death and resurrection. They told the story. They told all they had seen and heard. The women understood why there were all the questions, and doubts, and shaking heads as they told the story. It was a ridiculous story. It just doesn't happen. But it did.

Peter had to see for himself, so he ran to the tomb. He found the stone and empty tomb, just as the women said. He remembered Jesus' words about death and resurrection. It was a surprise.....more than a surprise. Could it really be true? Could it have really happened?

III. Reflection

The prophet Isaiah tells of a coming new heaven a new earth (Is. 65:17-25).....the work of God to transform what we know now. It will be a time of joy and peace.....surprise and delight beyond our imagination. Resurrection would come to be understood as part of that new heaven and earth.....new bodies appropriate for this new creation. Is Jesus resurrection somehow the signal that the new creation has begun, but is not yet complete? Is Jesus resurrection a sign that the power and grace of God will defeat sin and death.....the preview of the resurrection in the new creation for all? Is the resurrection of Jesus the great hope that the vision of Isaiah for a new heaven and earth will come to pass? Those early Christians came to believe that. It is a belief told in stories, and passed down through generations. It is a belief and story handed on to us this Easter.

And it is a surprise. It was a surprise to the women at the tomb, and to the disciples who first heard the story. It has been a surprise to people through the ages. If we listen, it is a surprise to us. Things like resurrection just don't happen. And yet, there the story is; a witness to a great surprise. What are we to do with the story?

I'm always surprised where interesting ideas "pop up" if I'm paying attention. In the old movie, Men in Black, a comedy about aliens on earth, there is a dialogue between Tommy Lee Jones and Will Smith that I find honest and interesting. In a challenge for Will Smith to be open to new ideas and surprises in life Tommy Lee Jones says:

"Fifteen hundred years ago everybody **knew** the earth was the center of the universe. And five hundred years ago everyone **knew** the earth was flat. And fifteen minutes ago you **knew** people were alone on this planet. Just image what you'll know tomorrow."

The point that I find interesting is not that there are aliens living on earth. Rather, the interesting point is that we come to discover new things that we once believed were impossible; we now know the earth is not the center of the universe, nor is the earth flat. We come to discover surprises break down and jump over the boundaries of our understanding, and we come to know something new. Surprises push us beyond the edge of the map of our lives, and we come to discover a new world. Surprises happen, and we reexamine old assumptions about life, faith, God.....and resurrection.

A story comes to mind about a belligerent young student storming up to Mahatma Gandhi and saying, "You have no integrity. Last week I heard you say one thing. And now today you are saying something entirely different. How can you justify such vacillation?" Gandhi looked at the young student and said, "It is really quite simple. I have learned something new since last week." (Christian Century, 2/23/10, p.14) That's true, isn't it? And may it always be true.

Surprises, openness, and learning something new.....I remember an experience in Sudan a few years ago. There I was in Khartoum, Sudan, in a market, with the Muslim call to prayer sounding from a minaret in the background, and 1000's of Sudanese Muslims rushing by to attend prayer at a large mosque. Many of the men wore light colored robes, and some women wore burkas. And I suddenly realized.....
...I was a long way from home.....a long way from the mountains of Washington State where I grew up...a long way from my high school graduating class of 28 students...
...a long way from my parent's little Presbyterian Church with 36 members. Back then foreign culture for me was going to the big city of Seattle. But there I was, 30 years later in a market in Sudan. It was beyond the edge of my life 30 years ago.....beyond the edge of my map back then. But surprises in life happen, and our lives are changed. I would have never thought it possible, but there I was.

And so we gather on this Easter morning. Some folks come often, and some once in a while. And, maybe for some it's been a long time, or not at all. But here we all are. And we all come this morning to hear the Easter message; stone rolled away, empty tomb, and the reports of the women. "He is risen" they say. "He is risen" generations of Christians have said since then. "He is risen," we say. We stand on the edge of the map of our lives, look into a mystery, and wonder if it could be true.

But surprises do happen. There is truth, life and joy beyond the edge of our map. In the telling of the Easter story there is the mystery of belief. There is a far country. And don't be surprised if the risen One invites you to come.....to take a step of faith beyond the edge of your map....and believe "he is risen."