

**March 31          Easter   2024**

Surprises come in all forms. When Lorraine and I first arrived here at Trinity, we immediately felt at home, which was a pleasant surprise. There were many other pleasant and surprising moments. One of the biggest was when I heard the deep and sonorous voice of Truett Bobo, my college Theology professor, whom we had not seen for over forty years. He still looked the same.

That is what happened to Mary at the Grave; she comes to the tomb and does not see the body of Jesus. She immediately assumes the worst: grave robbers. Mary, like us, was prepared for the worst; she is then surprised and astonished to learn that the person she believed to be the groundskeeper is Jesus. Our God is a God of surprises, from hanging the stars in the sky to parting the Red Sea.

The Gospel this morning concerns the greatest surprise of all: the raising of someone from the dead. All through the gospels, the astonishment that Mary expressed is chronicled. Thomas, later in this same chapter, does not believe the report of the other disciples. Jesus surprises everyone by passing through locked doors, twice.

The disciples on the Emmaus road in Luke, not recognizing Jesus, are surprised by him because they were not expecting him to rise from the dead. Even after people encounter Jesus, they struggle with the incongruity of something that they could not anticipate. Surprise disorients and challenges us also. When Jesus, post-resurrection, gave the great commission to the disciples in Matthew, it says, “they worshipped but some doubted”. They were probably thinking, “I didn’t see this coming”. Surprise can also be uncomfortable and disorienting and even shocking depending on how great the surprise is, and of course the biggest surprise in history is Jesus coming back from the dead.

Life, life eternal is more surprising than death. Death is inevitable; it is final in setting the boundaries of our lives. It forces us to do financial planning, secure insurance policies, and write wills and bequests for our

children. Death is Holy Week, but not this event, not today, this is Easter. It is hard to anticipate the wildcard that is the resurrection in our lives.

We see that wildcard when the Pope washes the feet of prisoners this week at a women's prison. We experience that wildcard when we listen to the Messiah. The music is always fresh, always revealing, but this is the backstory. Handel's Messiah released 142 people from debtors prison at its first performance. Imagine the joy of reunited families.

But what of those without families, what of orphans or those abandoned? These were also surprised by the Messiah for Handel's longest philanthropic affiliation was with the "Foundling's Hospital", whose official name was London's Hospital for the Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted Young Children. Handel's magnanimity towards the Foundling Hospital extended far past the box office, which succeeded in raising £7,000 (equivalent to 22 thousand of today's dollars) for the charity.

In addition, Handel personally donated £600 per year as well as underwriting the purchase of the organ. To assure that benefit performances of the Messiah could continue, he willed to the hospital a fair copy of the score and parts, delivered three weeks after his death on April 15, 1759. The music of the Messiah is always subtle, surprising, and profound. The Risen Messiah is also subtle, surprising, and profound. That is the message and joy of Easter, that we can live a life full of profound and subtle surprises.

In a few moments, we will hear the Messiah. Enjoy.