

SURPRISED BY THE RISEN CHRIST

Surprise parties are not for the feint-hearted. Some people greet the shock of, "Surprise!", with great excitement, while others will be momentarily dis-oriented or confused, before delight and excitement take over.



Surprise is at the very heart of the Easter story. Peter, John, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and the two walking to Emmaus had all lived through Good Friday. They knew there was no way back from death: their Lord was crucified, dead and buried. So, their grief was only heightened by confusion when they learned that the stone sealing Jesus' tomb had been rolled away and the tomb itself was empty. What did it mean? Jesus appearing to them, greeting them, calling them by name, what did it mean? How could these things not have taken them utterly by surprise and overturned their world?

What did Jesus' resurrection mean? What *does* it mean? If you had asked Peter or John or Mary, they might have answered: 'All we can say is that, at this point, we don't know; it is a joyful mystery, something so wonderful that it will take us a lifetime to understand'. For when the risen Jesus comes to us, and changes our lives, it takes time to absorb: even eternity's too short.

In the garden on the first Easter Day, Jesus comes to Mary and asks her who she is looking for. He had first asked that question when he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Now he asks it of the woman and, as she recognises him and responds with one insightful and loving word, "Teacher", the pain and loneliness of her past disappear.

Jesus comes to us as he came to Mary Magdalene; in our bewilderment and need. He asks us who we are looking for. Jesus calls us by name because, at its core, the resurrection is a deeply personal experience; it is not a distant miracle. It is the individual connection that changes everything.

Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, appeals to his readers to live in the light of the truth that had taken hold of them so vividly and claimed their allegiance. He writes: 'So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience...Above all, put on love which binds them all together in perfect unity.' In those magnificent words, Paul is saying that Easter is not simply something that happened *then*; it happens to us *now*, and goes on happening. Sometimes it happens *with* us, because we are looking for it and long for it more than anything; sometimes, indeed often, it happens *despite* us because we often

sleep-walk through life, hardly willing to entertain the thought that things could be different and better and richer, for us, our society and our world.

The miracle is that Christ works through us with or without our help: it is because of him, not because of us. What matters is God's work in us, so that we grow into a confident Resurrection faith: This is what Christianity is. *'If you have been raised with Christ'*: the *'if'* is not our willingness to co-operate but God's willingness to give life.

Easter Day holds out the promise that life can be different. And, no matter the time or the weather, it brings joy and reminds us why it is worth being alive.

Easter ties us back to what matters most through the ligaments that bind our lives to God and to one another as individual people and communities. Easter shows us where the sources of all life, love, and joy belong. We experience Christ risen from the dead in the welcome and embrace of his Easter greeting, and in the conviction that grows within us from one Easter to the next: nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Christ is risen. We are risen. New possibilities are open to us. There is happiness and hope. We do not need to be afraid any longer. We have come home.

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