

West Valley Presbyterian Church
Why did Jesus rise?
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Here we have it! People being reconciled after a long or short separation. They seemed pretty happy, didn't they, to see each other again.

Sometimes in airports I love to watch this very thing happen. People being reunited with their loved ones.

Its intense, and a lot of times there are tears...shouts of "Hey! Welcome Home!" or I'll hear family members say to each other

"There he is! There he is!" and then like a wave they charge toward someone, and that person puts down their bag and they fall into each others embrace.

Please be aware...I don't know these people.

I've never seen them before in my life.

I don't know their names, or where they live, or who this person is coming off the airplane. For all I know it could be a whole drug cartelle reuniting....\ \

But I watch these reunions and half the time I have tears in my eyes

Why? I think it because separation is such a hard thing...We deal with it, we expect it...but its just so hard to be apart from the ones we love
Right?

So when we are reunited, when what was splintered comes back together, when what was lost for awhile or what we were missing... ... comes back

It seems like it rights a wrong somehow

It unifies a split

It brings together what had been separated and it just feels right

There is something very good about families reuniting

There is something very good about someone who returns home

There is something very good about embracing that loved one with joy and just being glad that you are together
Its Veterans Day weekend and my goodness...you can go on You Tube and watch as soldiers are reunited with families they weren't sure they would ever see again
Its hard to watch these amazing reunions without tearing up...at least for me.

Now, lets rewind history a couple thousand years, and ask yourself this.
What if you had been had been a follower of Jesus
What if you had been there and watched him die
Would you the least little bit of expectation that you would ever see him again?
Would you anticipate a reunion, a face to face conversation a few days later?
Would you think that you might bump into him walking down the road?
Probably not...

Its very interesting in Mark's gospel because even though Mark is very brief and brass tacks (there is not a lot of flourish or extra stuff in Mark)
There are details included that matter
And what you have to know is that when you see a detail in Mark, pay attention because those details are there for a reason
Mark doesn't waste words

So...notice...right before the scripture we read in Mark 15...it says a series of things that could be considered to be worthless detail...(explain Joseph of Arimathea)

“Pilate was surprised that Jesus was already dead. (people sometimes hung on crosses for 2-3 days) Summoning the centurion he asked him if Jesus had already died. When he learned from the centurion that it was so, he gave the body to Joseph.” Mark 15:44-45

(Joseph takes the body from Pilate, wraps it in a linen shroud – the custom of the time – puts the body in a tomb hewn out of rock – rolls a stone up against the opening of the tomb and then Mark writes....)

“Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where he was laid.” Mark 15:47

Why does Mark say all this stuff? He wants that reader to understand first of all....that Jesus was totally and completely dead. Not only did he appear dead to Joseph of Arimathea who asked for his body...his death was confirmed by the centurion (*Probably the same one who declared “surely this was the son of God” and had a conversion experience at the cross*) ...as RICO will tell you in the DVD after...centurions knew a lot about execution...they knew when someone was dead.

Not only that but the women...saw where he was laid. They witnessed his burial and the stone being put in place in front of the opening.

Mark wants us to know...beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus really was dead.

Jesus died and was confirmed dead by a centurion. Then he was buried.

Do dead people come back from the grave?

No. We’ve already said this. Coming back from the dead is not the way things happen.

When you die...

That’s it...

And please don’t fall prey to what I call a kind of **chronological snobbery**.

Do you know what chronological snobbery is?

Chronological snobbery is when we say something like “*Oh those people way back then in Bible days. They believed in a bunch of mumbo jumbo.*

They were so primitive and unscientific. Of course they are going to come up with some fantastical story about coming back from the dead.”

Let me tell you...ancient Jews did not believe that a dead guy could come back to life any more than you or I believe it today

Once you were dead, in the ancient world, you were dead

No ifs, ands, or buts

Your life was over

What’s dead is dead

Now I love **Marks gospel** because as **the commentators tell us, “It smacks of authenticity”**

Why? Because the human reactions to the resurrection are so believable

The women saw where Jesus’ dead body, covered with a linen shroud was laid...they were in a hurry because of Passover

They couldn’t prepare Jesus body the way that they wanted...so...

After the Passover they go early in the morning on Sunday – three days later - to give him a proper burial by anointing his body with spices they had prepared

They had a plan of action

This was their “business as usual” way of handling the dead according to good Jewish burial protocol

Now here is where it gets complicated...here is where their whole system of thought and expectation gets all churned up

They get to the tomb...and see first of all that the stone is rolled away

They enter the tomb and not only is Jesus’ dead body not there

An angel is there to greet them

Mark writes, that when the women meet this shining young man in the tomb who tells them that Jesus has risen from the dead...tells them that Jesus is not there anymore...that he has gone ahead of them...they don’t say “*Oh...that’s great. Wow. I was really praying for that...*”

No! They are completely blown away.

It totally shocks them! It is so beyond anything they could have even imagined that they are just stunned...and confused

What? What is going on...

And Mark writes...“***trembling and bewildered the women went out and fled from the tomb.***”

They were so scared!! Why were they were scared? People who are dead, stay dead, even in the ancient world...they knew that then.....just like we know it today

Some of you are aware that I come from a long line of pastors in the PCUSA and the Methodist church too.

My grandfather on my mother's side was a pastor...and for awhile he pastored in Chicago Heights to some of the Italian communities there, and even preached in Italian

Now the Italian culture can be very emotive and superstitious and they often had open casket funerals where the casket would be in the sanctuary as the service was going on and people would be weeping and wailing and carrying on.

And my grandfather would always tell this story and he swore it was true

Of the time he did a funeral for a hunchback...who...because he was a hunchback...could not lie down flat in the casket.

So the funeral director took a wire and fastened it across the guys chest to keep him down

So the funeral is going on and then some organ music started to play and...guess what happened? The wire snapped and the mans head bobbed up

He didn't actually sit up, grandpa said.

His head just sort bopped up enough so people could see it moving...and when that happened

The place erupted in screams and half the church emptied out

People were terrified, and some didn't go back in the church even after people knew what had happened

Why were they terrified? Because what dies, usually stays dead
Except when it came to Jesus Christ...

On that early Sunday morning...when the women came

They were ready to do what they did for people who died

Anoint Jesus' body and give it a proper burial

And yet...they get there and find that what they thought was business as usual was nothing of the sort

Business as usual...the dead staying dead...had been turned on its head
Reversed! Transformed! So out of the realm of normality that...

And Mark tells us they are so scared they don't tell anybody anything
becausewho is going to believe them?

You see we know this story if we've been raised in church. We've had centuries to process the resurrection Jesus Christ. We have commentaries on top of commentaries that analyze and dissect the scriptures. We know it all so well.

But these women? These witnesses to the empty tomb? This is all new and totally bizarre - terrifying

Ever been so scared, so terrified, you can't even speak? That's how out of the ordinary...out of the framework of business as usual...this was...

So friends, when you think about the resurrection remember...one thing...

"Business as usual" is not a phrase that is in God's repertoire. Business as usual would mean that the dead stay dead...its kind of how things happen in this world....but nothing in the hands of our God stays dead...God is a God of resurrection and life.

That's why every time we have a memorial service here we always say the words of Jesus who told us **"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me though he were dead yet shall he live. And he who lives and believes in me will never die."**

Jesus wants us to know that because he has conquered death for us, we don't have to fear our own death either He is preparing a place for us after this life is over. "Because I live," Jesus tells us "You shall live also."

But we don't have to wait until we die to experience his resurrection power. Right now...in our lives...we can experience the surprising, life giving, generative, presence of God...God is a God of resurrection life not just for the sweet by and by ...but for right now too
I want to assure you today of this...because

Just when you think its over, just when you are sure the end has come, just when you are convinced you can predict the outcome and it is a dead end with a circumstance in your life that seems so hopeless and there is no way out...God says...uh uh...Trust me...*I am the author of new*

life, and of creative and surprising activity. I will make a way, where there seems to be no way. I will do that for you. Trust me.

When atheist/author/scholar C.S. Lewis was converted to Christ he called that conversion experience an experience of being “**Surprised by Joy**”. Jonathan Edwards classic wonderful 18th century pastor wrote... A Faithful Narrative of what? Of a Business as Usual kind of God? No! He wrote A Faithful Narrative of The Surprising Work of God..

God seems to relish creating surprises in our lives...that consistently and joyfully bring life out of death
he loves to pour new hope, possibility and vibrancy into our sorry tired out existence...He loves to pour out in surprising new ways life into dead relationships, dead expectations, hopes that have died he loves to revive us in surprising new and amazing ways...that may at times terrify us.....

And that's what's wrong with church sometimes. It can become a time of business as usual. We come here, we know sort of what to expect ...it happens...we go home...we carry on.... sometimes we are so sure of what is coming next that we don't give God a chance to move...we don't expect anything new

So I am going to surprise you today...to remind you of the surprising work of God that always brings life out of death and that has nothing to do with Business As Usual...

And what I am going to ask you to do may terrify you.

And I am sorry

But, in being terrified you might actually begin to identify a bit more with the women at the tomb, because nothing happened that resurrection morning that they were expecting. Nothing at all.

You may flee from this church, you may never come back...I may never come back for that matter...you may not let me after you find out what I am going to ask you to do...

but when we become Christians...when we say YES I believe in the resurrection...we are saying “I am ready Lord to be surprised by you. I am ready Lord for my life to NOT be about staying safe, to not be about

business as usual...I am ready to live differently, act differently, and be involved with your surprising life giving activity..on this sorry dark planet”

If you have been here three times or less you are exempt and also if you have trouble moving physical reasons...and so is the choir (join now and next time you don't have to participate)...I want everybody to stand up and go and sit in a different place than where you usually sit.

Terrifying I know....but try

Move so that you have a new perspective on things. Don't just move over six inches. And if you really want to take the challenge...sit next to someone you don't know.

(people move) How many of you are ready to flee from church as the women fled from the tomb, right now?

So from where you are now...do you see things differently than you did before?

Because after the resurrection happened, it changed the entire perspective of the disciples...the whole landscape of faith in God became a new thing

The resurrection...

changed their view on life and death

It changes their understanding of who God was

It made them hopeful, and resilient and filled with praise no matter what happened

Another small detail is the inclusion of Peter in the angels statement.

The angel says to the women in Mark 16:7 **“Go tell his disciples”**

And he could have stopped there

But he adds this detail which is a marvelous grace filled detail

“Go tell his disciples and Peter that He is going ahead of you into Galilee.”

Why Peter?

Peter was one of the disciples too.

But Peter had denied Christ three times remember? That's why this detail is in scripture... God wanted to be sure that Peter especially knew that he was included in this surprising resurrection work of God
He wants you to know that our failings, and our inability to do what we want to do for the Lord
Does not exclude us from being able to experience the living power of Christ in our lives
Its actually when we fail the most, that we know we need God the most
That's why Peter is especially mentioned

God says "SURPRISE!"... Because I am alive, you shall live also

Remember how I started this...talking about how moving it is to watch families embracing the ones they love after they haven't seen them for awhile

God says to us today...who are Peters...who haven't done it all the right way...who have had grand aspirations and fallen short...*because of the cross you are forgiven*

You and me...we are reconciled...you were far off but now you are back in my embrace

I've paid the price...I've bridged the gap

I've made a way so that you and I can be together.

Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians **Death where is your victory? Death where is you sting? The sting of death is sin, the power of sin is the law. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."**

There is nothing that is business as usual about that statement. Nothing at all.

Paul is saying what is dead..in Christ...doesn't stay dead...when handed over to Jesus Christ.

I want to close with a story today as I often do.
You are sitting in a new place to hear this story today

Because this story is about a woman who found herself in a new place after 12 years of struggle
To see things differently than most – and do what most of us could never do
This story at first blush is a story about forgiveness but actually it is a story that illustrates how much the living Christ
In us makes a difference...in how we live our lives

There is nothing that is business as usual about this story
It is actually quite surprising, even in some sense troubling and convicting for us

But its a story of resurrection. It is a story of how life came out of death because of the power of Jesus Christ.

NEW HAVEN -- When a young man kills another young man, it's not often that the victim's mother comes to one day call the killer her "spiritual son." But that's what happened between Mary Johnson and Oshea Israel, the 16-year-old who, in 1993, killed Johnson's son
Israel, now a grown man released from prison, lives in the apartment next door to Johnson, a living situation illustrative of the power of forgiveness. Johnson is from Minnesota, but recently came to the Church on the Rock in New Haven to tell her story.

The event was sponsored by a number of organizations, including the Civil Justice Clinic at Quinnipiac University School of Law and the Lowenstein International Human Rights Clinic at Yale Law School.

After Israel killed Johnson's son, Johnson said she saw him as an "animal." During the trial, she said she was full of hate, but, as a "Christian woman," Johnson told Israel she forgave him.

That was not true.

She spent decades harboring that hatred for Israel, until she decided to meet him in prison.

They spoke for two hours, each telling the other their life stories.

After that conversation, something changed.

"I said, 'Look, in court I told you that I forgave you, but today I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that I forgive you. I can't hold on to you any longer.' It had been 12 years," Johnson said.

"And he said, 'Maam, how can you do that?' I said, '**Because of who it is that lives within me.**'

At the end of the meeting, Israel asked Johnson for a hug.

Johnson agreed. She cried in his arms and he held her.

From there, Johnson started a nonprofit organization called **From Death to Life.**

Its goal is to end the cycle of violence through reconciliation between families of victims and those who caused them harm.

Israel and Johnson travel around the country together sharing their story, to promote nonviolence, peace and forgiveness.

"Oshea Israel is my spiritual son, and, as I said, I treat him as my son. ... I am proud of him. He is not that 16-year-old boy that he was," Johnson said.

1" **I am so thankful that my heart is in a new place to realize that.**"

No business as usual here. Just a simple woman, in a new place; who because of Jesus in her was able herself to move from death to life – and is changing the world - because of who it is who lives inside her.

May we all be in a new place today, to recognize the power of the resurrection in our own lives, and be reconciled to a God who surprises us with grace at every turn. – who never ever lets us live in a way that is “business as usual”. AMEN