

## **“God’s Wonderful Surprise”**

Today as we focus on the Resurrection, I want to use a reflection which was recently in this month’s *Upper Room*. Xavia Arndt Sheffield shares about her experience with God’s plans and our plans. When she and her husband celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary, they retraced some of their memories with a trip to New York City, where they were married. They stayed at the same hotel, attended the church where they had met and gotten married, and took a carriage ride through Central Park. But one of their most memorable experiences, totally unplanned and spontaneous, was meeting the 99-year-old pianist who still played the piano regularly at the hotel’s restaurant. He came over to their table during their meal and said that he wanted to write a song for their anniversary. And so, he did, and he also played “Anniversary Waltz.” It became the cherished memory that they have added to all their other memories.

Like that musician, God has a way of surprising us with unplanned and even unimaginable things: the people who came out to greet Jesus as he entered Jerusalem, the disciples who expected the same Passover supper, the disciples who wanted Jesus to lead an armed insurrection against the Romans, and those who plotted to kill Jesus because he disagreed with them. God surprised all of them

with an unexpected end to the story of Jesus. God gave them and us a new experience, a new outlook, and a new and eternal life.

The scripture Ms. Sheffield uses is Proverbs 19:21, which reads: *The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established.*” God clearly had a wonderful surprise that Easter morning when the women came to Jesus’ tomb to bring spices to anoint Jesus’ dead body and pay tribute to him. They did not expect to find that Jesus had risen from the dead. In spite of what Jesus had said about his resurrection, the reality was that the attitude of the disciples was that everything had failed in tragedy. No one really expected to find an empty tomb. In our scripture today in Mark 16:1-8 the women’s biggest concern was how they would get to the body. The tomb had a large stone that needed to be moved and how were they going to move the stone.

But God had a plan. When the women arrived, the large stone had been moved away. When they went into the tomb, they could not find Jesus’s body. A young man in the tomb, probably an angel, told them that Jesus was not there. He had risen.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the central fact of the Christian faith. As my father preached many times, belief in the actual resurrection is central to our faith. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, we likely would have never heard of

him. The best proof of the resurrection is the existence of the Christian church.

Nothing else could have changed sad and despairing men and women into people with joy and flaming with courage.

As commentator William Barclay writes, because of the Resurrection, certain things follow. First, Jesus is not a figure in a book. He is a living person. We do not just study Jesus as an historical figure. We meet him as a living person.

Second, Jesus is not just a memory. He is a presence. Even the best of memoirs fade. But Jesus stays with us.

Third, this means that the Christian life is not about the life of the person who knows about Jesus but the person who knows Jesus. There is a difference. We know about Queen Elizabeth or Pope Francis or whoever is the President of the United States, but hardly any of us actually know them. The greatest scholar in the world, the person who knows everything about Jesus in the books, knows less about Jesus than the humblest Christian who knows him every day.

Fourth, the Resurrection means that there is an endless quality about the Christian faith. The Christian faith should never stand still. Because our Lord is a living Lord there are new wonders and new truths waiting to be discovered all the time.

Barclay writes that the most precious thing about this passage is when the messenger states “go and tell his disciples and Peter.” This message must have cheered Peter’s heart when he got it! He must have been going through torture because of his denial of Jesus. But suddenly a message is directed specifically to him. It is characteristic of Jesus that He thought, not of all that Peter had done wrong but of the remorse that Peter was undergoing. Jesus was more eager to comfort the sinner than to punish the sin.

When Ellisa and I make plans to vacation in Europe, there are planned stops and places we know we will visit. When we went to Spain and Portugal in November 2019, we knew we would visit places like Seville, Toledo, Barcelona, and Granada. We knew we would see many beautiful and ornate cathedrals. We knew we would see the burial place of Columbus and the beautiful natural scenery. We would visit Fatima, where three children said they were visited by the Virgin Mary in 1917.

I have found, though, that the things I remember most about vacations are the things which are not planned. It once again shows that God has his own plans. On the trip to Portugal and Spain, one couple we met was a Korean-American husband and wife who had been in the United States for a number of years and are American citizens. Most people who find out that I was once a lawyer who became

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a minister are intrigued, but this couple in their 40s was especially interested.

About a week into the trip, they scheduled a breakfast with me to discuss my faith journey. Although they were Christians, I gathered they needed some spiritual advice in their own lives. We continued to talk during the remaining week of the trip.

Although we usually make new friends on these trips, I usually do not plan to share my faith. But God had a surprise for me on this trip. I remember the beautiful buildings and scenery we saw on the trip, but the most cherished memory is my witness to this husband and wife.

As we celebrate the Resurrection today, ask yourself if the Resurrection is a living event for you. Are you open to the Holy Spirit bringing you wonders and memories you never planned? Our faith should never stand still. We should always expect God to give us a surprise, another empty tomb when we least expect it!