

# *Acting Surprised*

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## **Easter**

John 20:1-18

*“I have seen the Lord!”*

“Stop me if you have heard this!” How many times has someone said that to you, and you have heard the joke, but you want to be polite, you want to give the person the moment. So you grin, you act as if you have never heard the joke before, and you listen intently, waiting for the punch line, but in the back of your mind you are crafting a way to change the direction of the conversation. It is worse when the person telling the joke gets it wrong and you find yourself in the uncomfortable position where either you can tell the joke correctly, demonstrating that you have indeed heard this one, or stumble through the awkward, poorly delivered punch line. Why can't we just say, “Stop? I've heard this one.” Why can't we just leave the rules of decorum, even if it is only for a moment, and avoid the monotony and the boredom of a repeated joke? Yet more often than not we find ourselves glancing at our watches as an individual badly tells a joke, which wasn't that, funny in the first place.

My piano teacher, Joseph Fennimore, would say to me just after assigning scales and arpeggios, “repetition leads to monotony, and monotony leads to boredom.” That statement holds some truth, doesn't it? It's the repetition that leads to the monotony and the boredom, isn't it? It is hearing the same thing again, and again and again that leads us to glance at our watches and wish we had the power to speed up time. Have you ever found yourself reading the same book to a child every night, until you know the book by heart? Maybe you have found yourself watching the same movie again and again, and by now you are able to transcribe the dialogue. Have your days become routine so that you can predict how your day is going to be three weeks from now? Have you become a tour guide who has gone through the tour so much that you know what is where, how, and when without even looking? The monotony of the repetition leads to boredom. In the beginning of the movie, *American Beauty*, Kevin Spacey's character has fallen into such a rut in his life that he looks forward to TV marathons for men on TNT; his life has become so boring that he claims he was no longer even living. Even with running gags in comedies, there is a time when the gag becomes predictable, contrived and trite. From Fibber McGee's closet to Cousin Larry's and Cousin Larry's silence, even to Gary Coleman's “What you talkin' about” the repetition can lead to a monotony that

creates an awful feeling of boredom. Have you heard this one before – if so, please, please stop me; I don't want to bore you.

Now I want you to think for a moment, and be honest with me – have you ever felt this way with the resurrection story, with the story of Easter? Have you heard this story before? I think it is the second most told story of Christ, just after Christmas. You know the story, and maybe you know it to well. Maybe, as you read the gospel, you find yourself skipping to past the tomb to the appearances of Christ in locked rooms. After all, those stories are much more exciting than a foot race of the disciples to see nothing. Maybe you look to the many variations of the resurrection story to keep it fresh. Not the four gospels, but the movie variations. From *King of Kings*, to Gibson's *Passion*, we look for ways to make the story interesting, ways to give it a twist, and ways to keep us engaged. After all, we have heard it all before, haven't we? In one of these variations on the story, *Jesus of Montréal*, the main character, an actor, was asked by the local priest to take the tired, old passion play that has been done for years without

any life or energy, and rewrite it, make the play modern, make it more tangible. Have you ever felt like doing that with the Easter story? I have seen churches try to look at the story from the woman's point of view, from the flower's point of view, and from a bird's point of view – anything to make the story fresh and new. Because what are we in danger of is repetition, boredom, and monotony, and the people will get restless. Think about this, if you come to church out of obligation on Easter Sunday, because it is supposed to be something special, and you hear the same story that you have heard last year, your boredom would be a surface emotion of your anger over time wasted, right? So you are probably expecting something glitzy, something fancy, and something over-the-top. Otherwise you would see the church as being lazy; you may even see me as being lazy. Martin Luther when talking about this very problem, once preached:

And it may, of course, happen again that the story will be silenced either by virtue of factious spirits who distort and obliterate it, or by lazy preachers who fail to give this article due attention. When we preachers are lazy, you will retain nothing. You merely go about brewing you beer, and the pertinent, pure doctrine lies neglected. (From the House Postials – Easter Sermon)

Can I risk being lazy, or risk glossing over one part of the story by spicing up another part of the story; add something to it, or maybe focusing on one aspect of the story or another? In the glitz, parts of the story will be lost, and in the boredom all of the story will be lost. I'm asking you to be honest – have you heard this before? Do you want to hear the same story again?

Today, I'm going to invite you to hear the story, and enter into the action of the story as if it is for you the first time. I'm not going to pontificate on the historical veracity of the resurrection, on the theological significance of the resurrection, or even on the particular points of hierarchy because it is the woman who sees Christ first. No, instead I am inviting you to take part in the story and see it with your own eyes. I am challenging you to hear this story with a second naïveté; I am inviting you to sit up and take note of the angels at the head and the feet. I am challenging you to keep this story fresh. Like an actor repeating his or her lines for the 100th time, we have to try to stay true to the lines, and at the same time to hear and read the story in a way that maintains its power and potency. We can do this because this story is what the theologian David Tracy calls a classic; it is a story, which connects us to a greater reality, to a greater truth.

Something similar happened to me in music school. I was listening to Beethoven's fifth symphony, the one that goes, ----. I hated that piece. It was overplayed, overused, it had become an assumed part of pop culture, and I resented it. But I listened anyway, and was sucked in. Beethoven's fifth symphony is a classic piece of music that connects with a truth about the power of well-written music, and I found myself engaged and active when listening to the piece despite myself. It was as if I was hearing the piece for the first time. The Resurrection story can hold the same power for all of us, if we hear it with fresh ears. Enter into the narrative, become a character in the story, and allow the narrative of the resurrection to challenge you, push you, and bring you to the empty

tomb with fresh eyes, not knowing what to expect. I am inviting you today to hear the story again for the first time.

This means you must pretend, and suspend your knowledge of the end, and walk through the story. This is what we did this past week when we walked from Palm Sunday to the last supper and then to the cross, we were re-living the story. We must suspend our foresight, and act surprised as the disciples did when Christ declared that one would betray him. We must suspend our knowledge of the end and act surprised when we see Judas approaches Christ in the garden with a garrison of soldiers. We must act surprised when the crowd turns on Christ, asking for Barabbus, sending Jesus to his death. We walk with Christ to the mountain, and hear his words of suffering, his agony, and feel his pain. Are you in the story now? Take him down from the cross, gently lower his body, and see, and know that Christ is dead. Can you feel your anguish that the one you loved was rejected and killed by the world? Can you help carry Christ down the hill and to the tomb? Wrap his body in linen, as is done for the dead, and then place him, set him gently in the tomb. Take a moment to allow the truth, the power, the reality of the events to settle in your heart - your hope, your salvation, your Lord of life has died, and is now lying in the tomb, wrapped in cloth. Now go home and weep with your loved ones. Weep with your friends over Jesus'

death. Are you in the story now?

Weep on Saturday, and the on Sunday, walk with the woman to the tomb, walk with Mary, and feel her anguish and grief. Now, act surprised because the stone is no longer in front of the tomb. Run, run to get others, run to get the disciples, run to find some help and some support for only the worst can come from an open tomb. Imagine the thoughts going through your mind - did someone take his body? Was it the Romans, was it the Pharisees, or was it some other radical fringe group? Run back to the disciples with panic on your mind. Are you in the story now?

Act surprised when you hear that the stone is no longer in from of the tomb. Don't think, run, run back to the tomb. The other disciple is with you, passing you reaching the tomb, and then stopping, hesitating to enter. What could this mean? Why would someone take the body? Why would the tomb be empty? Enter the tomb, look and see - cloth lying as you placed it in the tomb. The cloth for the body and the cloth for the head are lying there in the tomb. Act surprised; act shocked and confused. Maybe now you get it. Maybe now you see and understand, as did the one disciple Jesus loved. Maybe not yet. Are you in the story now?

Finally, there is Mary, still weeping outside the tomb. Her tears fall, her hurt burns, and her mind is numb. The theologian Anslem of Canterbury describes Mary in this way:

Saint Mary Magdalene,

You came with springing tears

To the spring of mercy, Christ...

How can I find words to tell?

About the burning love with which you sought Him

Weeping at the sepulcher

And wept for Him seeking?

For the sweetness of love He shows Himself

Who would not for the bitterness of tears? (Found in Christian Century, March 22, 2005, 18.)

Are you in the story now?

Now let go and stop acting that you are surprised. Be surprised, be shocked, and allow your grief to be transformed as Christ appears to you. Be surprised as the one you saw die stands before you, offering comforting words, and placing the soothing touch upon your wounded grief. Be in the story, do not act surprised but be surprised. Be surprised that the hope lost stands before you now alive. Be surprised that your despair has been overcome. Be surprised as you go through wash and wash of emotion. Find yourself becoming a part of the story, find yourself reliving the story, and find yourself in the story. Have you heard this? Have you lived this? Do you hear this story now for the first time? Have you allowed yourself to become a part of the story so that you may experience the power of the story? Can you pretend so much, can you act so surprised that the surprise becomes real for you? The tomb is empty, Christ is alive, and death has been overcome by the power of God!

Now, let the ending sink in. Let the surprise; let the emotion and the impact settle in your heart. How were you pulled through the story? What was triggered in your consciousness, as Christ appears to you, alive? Give it time, let it sink in, let the power of this cataclysmic revelation slowly wash over you, change you and transform you. Let the ending sink in. A new time has begun, we are given a fresh view of life; we have been changed, for on Friday we believed in death. On Friday we believed that things could end. On Friday we believed that all hope could be lost. But, let this ending sink in. Today, hope is before us. Today death has lost its sting. Today grace, glory, and God's power reigns. On Friday we placed in the tomb with Christ our despair, our sins, our greed, our selfishness, our desire for power, and our hate. On Friday we rolled the stone in from of the tomb, grieving how Christ died because of our fallen nature. But today, today we look in the tomb and find still our sins, our despair, our greed, all that we placed with Christ are still in the tomb, but Christ is no longer there. Christ has buried our faults, our sins, and has come back to give us a new hope, a new life! From the grave, from our fallen-ness Christ arose and comes to us today with new life and new hope!

Let this ending sink in. A new time, a new life is given to us. Maybe you saw yourself as a flawed individual, give that to Christ, and leave it in the grave. Maybe you saw yourself as a greedy individual, a critical individual, a selfish individual – give it to Christ, leave it in the grave, and become a person, new, cleansed, and hopeful. Maybe you look in the world and see nothing but violence, nothing but hate, nothing but despair. Give it to Christ, leave it in the grave, and begin to live a new life of hope and promise. Is this ending beginning to sink in? Nothing is beyond God's reach, neither power, nor

principality, nor sin, nor life, nor death, Christ is alive and hope is real! Let that sink in, let it wash over you, and let that story become your story.

Now the story really begins. Now we start to live as what the theologian McClendon calls a “resurrection people.” We live life differently because we know of the hope and the power of the resurrection. As John Calvin claims, we rise with Christ and we seek now those things that are above, those things that are holy, and those things that are of God. This is the ground of our Church community – which Christ rose and we can live as followers of this Christ. This is what makes our community different, holy, and alive, that no matter who you are, where you come from, or what others say about you, there is a place for you in this community because Christ took all of the bad, all of the negative, all of the smear and left it in the tomb. This is a higher way of being a community, a higher way of living. We are living with a new view, a new hope in the world. The story now begins.

Think of the eleven American Baptist missionaries of Hopevale in the Philippines during WWII. They were surrounded and captured by the Japanese, but they did not lose hope because they were living the Christian story. All eleven were martyred, and all eleven were living the new life of Christ even as they lost their lives. Their death was not their defeat because they lived the story of the resurrection. This is where the story leads us – to a higher way of living, which knows that there are no bounds, which can keep us from God. A new time has begun, a time of hope, promise and salvation, and we are called to live in that time. The story now begins.

So as you leave this building, as you leave this gathering, let the power of the resurrection be fresh in your heart. Let the redeeming power of the Cross be true in your life as you now begin to live your new life, your new story as a follower of the risen one, the Christ. Remember that on Friday, Christ died, on Friday, Christ was buried, hope was lost and death was real. But today, Christ has risen; the tomb is empty. Today hope is real. Today life is real and salvation is granted. Christ has risen. Christ has risen indeed!

AMEN