



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER, APRIL 23, 2023
ACTS 2:14a, 36-41; PSALM 116:1-3, 10-17; 1 PETER 1:17-23; LUKE 24:13-35

THE GIFT OF SURPRISE



Luke 24:13-35 *[Now on that same day two of Jesus' disciples were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him. And he said to them, "What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?" They stood still, looking sad. Then one of them, whose name was Cleopas, answered him, "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" He asked them, "What things?" They replied, "The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes, and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning, and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but they did not see him." Then he said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he*

interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures. As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, "Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over." So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?" That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, "The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!" Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.]

I spent this past week on the bank of the Mississippi River in Memphis, Tennessee. The sunshine was brilliant in its warmth; the meeting room for my clergy group was strategically built on the Chickasaw Bluff adjacent to the flood plain, with a wall of



windows looking westward, toward the river, where we could watch the river's current roil its eight-mile-an-hour dance to the sea, while tug boats pushed barges tied together, some stretching more than two football fields in length, up and down the river, navigating the obstacle course of oxbow curves and bridge stanchions in the mighty river. In my four days there, I never tired of the symphony of riverine movement that drew me in with its relentless flow.

On meeting breaks, I made my way down to the riverbank where giant cottonwoods, hickories, and oaks stood watch while their leaves fluttered in the chute of river wind.

The ground was silty with grass and clover that drew bees to their zazen work, and picnickers on blankets for their springtime fetes.

Spring will come into full bloom in Seattle, too—soon, I hope—the fruit trees have heralded the arrival with their

dappled blooms. Daffodils and tulips have joined the chorus, and daphne has published its aromatic scent in the neighborhood. The question for us, I suppose, is can we be surprised still by such predictable beauty?

Brother David Steindl-Rast says that surprise is the seed of gratitude. We are evolutionarily programmed to open our eyes wider in response to surprise, especially when it evokes wonder or awe. Everything is a gift, he says, and the spiritual work we all have is to see that all that we have, and all that we are, and all that we experience, is gift. Surprise is the catalyst for seeing it all as such, and not taking it for granted. Again, surprise is the seed for gratefulness.ⁱⁱ

But Brother David, whose wisdom is held in such high esteem in our household that we call him DSR—David Steindl-Rast. DSR goes even further: he says, “Of all the names for the Holy One whom I worship, “Surprise” is my favorite.” What does it mean to see God as Surprise?

When was the last time you were surprised by God in your life?

This invitation to surprise lies at the heart of today’s gospel, when two disciples engage the Risen Christ unknowingly. Perhaps the story is so familiar that we miss the marks for our participation in the gifted encounter. The two disciples are proxy for all who would follow Jesus (you and me). Demoralized, weary, maybe even despairing after Jesus was crucified, they decide to return to their village a couple of hours walk from the city when a walking companion joins them. They don’t recognize him.

What are you discussing, the stranger asks? They stood still, looking sad. That might have been the moment of surprise were it not for their eyes being closed still. But Jesus is patient with them, retracing the story from Moses on to the Messiah. I see Jesus’ demeanor as unrushed, tender, and fully present to them. He walked with them as long as it took, until their hearts were burning.

When was the last time your heart was burning with the presence of God?

They don’t want it to end, so they invite him to stay on for dinner, where the familiar eucharistic pattern of taking bread, blessing and breaking it, and giving it to them—that is, gift—becomes the moment of surprise in which their eyes open wider to see the gift before them.

Caravaggio’s famous painting of this Supper at Emmaus captures the moment so wonderfully, with Cleopas backing his chair from the table to rise in astonished delight while throwing his hands out in remarkable fashion as the fruit plate teeters on the edge of the table. His left hand seems to pierce the fourth wall of the scene to invite us in.

And as Jesus departs from their midst, they arise and decide to return to Jerusalem to share this incredibly surprising news.

When was the last time you had such incredible news of divine revelation in your life that you couldn’t wait to share it?

We need not think that the divine experience that has our hearts burning and our souls yearning to share it must be miraculous. We need only be alert enough to see the surprising thing unfolding in front of us. Or as Brother David says: alert enough to

penetrate the husk of the ordinary to discover the seed of surprise... which gives rise to gratefulness for the gift.

It can be as familiar as the springtime blooms or the river's power. It can even be within us all the time.

Did you know that your marrow produces some 15 million red blood cells every single second?

Or that your blood vessels, were they to be stretched out end to end, would wrap the earth at the equator, and yet your heart pumps every bit of blood through an entire circuit every minute?

Or that your heart beats 100,000 times every day?

Or that your heart produces enough kinetic energy to power an electric vehicle twenty miles each day, or to the moon and back in a lifetime?

Talk about burning hearts, right?! It's all right before us, and within us.

Everything is gift, even the experiences that leave us standing still, or looking sad, or bewildered beyond understanding. The gift comes in divine surprise that loves you, is patient with you, is always on the spiritual road with us, whether we recognize it or not, and is willing to take what is broken, and blesses it still, to be given as gift.

Gifts of God for the People of God.

ⁱ <https://ychef.files.bbci.co.uk/live/624x351/p09ls4pd.jpg>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.dailygood.org/story/2028/surprise-is-a-seed-brother-david-steindl-rast/>