

## THE SURPRISE OF THEIR LIVES!

### John 20:1-9

(NIV) Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. <sup>2</sup> So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put Him!" <sup>3</sup> So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. <sup>4</sup> Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, <sup>7</sup> as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. <sup>8</sup> Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. <sup>9</sup> (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Can you recall a major surprise in your life? Over 30 years ago, my brother, Danny, ate at McDonald's in Tempe while attending a basketball coaching clinic at Arizona State University. He received a game piece with his meal. When he opened it, it said, "\$100,000 instant winner!" But this was not his biggest surprise. He told himself, "Yeah, right, I'm going to walk up to the counter and they're going to give me \$100,000." He thought this game piece was just a chance to win this money in a future drawing. So he tossed it. Three days later, when back home in Tucson, his kids told him he really had won \$100,000. He was shocked! By then, he knew there was no way to retrieve this ticket from the trash. His game ticket really was worth \$100,000 (about \$200,000 today). He lost it by believing it was too good to be true!

An event can be thrust upon us and so take us by surprise that we'd never have predicted it in a million years. The Resurrection of **Jesus** on the first Easter morning caught His disciples by great surprise. For nearly a full year earlier, **Jesus** had tried to prepare His leadership team for His death and Resurrection, as recorded in **Matthew 16:21** (NASB): "From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day." Preconceived ideas of **Jesus'** first followers prevented them from grasping the reality of His words, like my brother's preconceived ideas kept him from believing his winning game piece was real. Before He's crucified, His disciples think **Jesus** will be a far different type of Messiah—a strong and powerful ruler who will vanquish all of Israel's enemies; a political ruler more than a spiritual king. When He appears to be helpless while being arrested, tried, condemned, and brutally murdered, their heads are left spinning. They ask themselves, "Where can we hide so we won't be arrested or even put to death?" Just a few days later, while they are still overcome with grief, there's a knock at the door where they are fearfully hiding. Mary Magdalene has a stunning report. **Jesus'** tomb is empty! They're thrown into even greater confusion. They wonder, "First His life is taken from us and now someone has robbed His grave?"

They still don't get it. **Jesus'** grave wasn't robbed by men. It was robbed by God! Later that same day, more reports of the risen Lord **Jesus** begin to come in: from other women, then Peter, then two who encounter Him en route to the nearby village of Emmaus. While "the eleven" remaining original disciples and other early followers are "gathered" and speaking of these astounding reports, **Jesus** personally shows Himself to them, as recorded in **Luke 24:36-43** (NIV): "While they were still talking about this, Jesus Himself stood among them and said to them, 'Peace be with you.' <sup>37</sup> They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. <sup>38</sup> He said to them, 'Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? <sup>39</sup> Look at My hands and My feet. It is I Myself! Touch Me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.' <sup>40</sup> When He had said this, He showed them His hands and feet. <sup>41</sup> And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, He asked them, 'Do you have anything here to eat?' <sup>42</sup> They gave Him a piece of broiled fish, <sup>43</sup> and He took it and ate it in their presence."

Exactly one week before the first Easter morning, on Palm Sunday, **Jesus** appeared to be at the height of His popularity and ready to fulfill the expectations of those who were seeking a political Messiah. **Mark 11:8-10** (NIV) describes what's known as **Jesus'** "Triumphal Entry" into Jerusalem, Israel's capital: "Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields.<sup>9</sup> Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted, 'Hosanna!' [a transliteration of a Hebrew expression that literally means "save now" or "save, we pray"]. 'Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!' <sup>10</sup> 'Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!' 'Hosanna in the highest heaven!'" Have you ever been close to gaining what you believed would be a great, long-desired blessing, but then had to stand by helplessly as it was taken from you? In late 1975, 75 convicts came up with a bold plan to dig a secret tunnel to bring them up on the other side of the massive wall of Saltillo Prison in northeastern Mexico. They spent weeks making plans on where best to begin their tunnel and to steal or manufacture the needed equipment. They began tunneling in November. As weeks turned into months, their anticipation of breathing free air again filled them with hope and joy. Finally on April 18, 1976, which happened to be Easter Sunday that year, they broke through the surface and began scrambling up out of their tunnel. Only it wasn't to freedom. They'd shockingly tunneled up into the same nearby courtroom where many of them had been sentenced. The surprised judges immediately returned all 75 inmates to prison.

I think it's safe to say that **Jesus'** disciples and closest followers were even more dismayed than these inmates over the collapse of their hopes. After its promising beginning with the Triumphal Entry on Palm Sunday of the One the disciples believed was Israel's long-awaited Messiah, within five days their hopes seemed shattered! American theologian Harvey Cox, now age 89, says there were no less than six would-be Messiahs around the time of **Jesus**. All proclaimed they were God's divinely inspired agents to restore Israel to a kingdom of great victory over their enemies, peace, and prosperity. Yet, all of them died without achieving their goals. If the Messiah you follow dies, you have two choices: choose another Messiah to follow or go home broken and disillusioned. No one, absolutely no one, follows a dead Messiah.

**Jesus'** earliest followers were at a crossroads. They couldn't merely choose someone else to look up to as their religious and political leader. They really hadn't chosen **Jesus**; He had chosen them. And **Jesus** was a radically different kind of Messiah. He refused efforts to crown Him king. He made no attempt to raise an army. He condemned political violence. He refused to change His message to gain the backing of Israel's religious leaders. And He placed women, children, non-Jewish Gentiles, and even hated Roman soldiers and officials on an equal footing before God; equally in need of God's saving mercy and grace and equally loved and valued by God.

There's only one explanation why the faith of **Jesus'** first disciples did not remain disillusioned and crushed. Within 20 years, Christianity, the faith that **Jesus** is indeed God's Christ, the Messiah—the One foretold for millennia who would inaugurate Israel's and the world's *spiritual restoration* built upon righteousness, holiness, and peace—was spreading like wildfire throughout the known world. What is the only explanation why these formerly self-centered, timid, even cowardly followers of **Jesus** would boldly carry the Good News of Christ's sacrificial love for all peoples to the ends of the earth, even at the cost of their own death? What is the only explanation? The Resurrection of **Jesus**! Tradition tells us that Voltaire (1694-1778), the prince of skeptics, once told a group of fellow skeptics, "It would be easy to start a new religion to compete with Christianity. All the founder would have to do is die and then be raised from the dead." Christianity is not so much a new teaching, or a new code of ethics and morals, as it is the testimony of a remarkable event; so remarkable and unforeseen that none truly expected it, or even dared hope for it. The heartbeat of Christianity is our risen Lord. **Romans 1:1-4** (NASB) announces, "Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called *as* an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, <sup>2</sup> which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures, <sup>3</sup> concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, <sup>4</sup> who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord"!

Of course, there have always been skeptics who go to great lengths to present ridiculous theories that require greater faith than to accept the reality of **Jesus'** death and Resurrection. Someone wrote to a local newspaper advice columnist: "Dear Uticus, Our preacher said on Easter that Jesus just swooned on the cross and that His disciples nursed Him back to health. What do you think? Sincerely, Bewildered." The columnist replied, "Dear Bewildered, Beat your preacher with a cat of nine tails with 39 heavy strokes, nail him to a cross, hang him in the sun for six hours, run a spear through his heart, embalm him, put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours, and see what happens. Sincerely, Uticus."

But even those closest to **Jesus** in His last years, disciples who'd witnessed Him perform mind-blowing miracles—multiplying food out of thin air, walking on water, healing lepers or other medically hopeless people of every conceivable illness or malady including blindness, stopping full-blown storms at a single command, and raising the dead—even they struggled to believe His Resurrection could be a reality. This was for two reasons. First, they had to allow their preconceived ideas of God's will for **Jesus** and for them to change. They had to give up their political thoughts about how **Jesus** could best fulfill God's prophecies of the Messiah and accept a spiritual Lord who would defeat death, the Devil, disease, and the destructive power of sin over them, as being more crucial than gaining their political freedom. They also had to be willing to accept their humble role as servants in Christ's kingdom rather than the ambitious role of rulers they'd envisioned for themselves. Secondly, they had to accept by faith that what seemed too good to be true, that their beloved Master could truly rise again from the grave and gain the power of eternal life for all His followers, could actually be true. When all these realities sank into their hearts and minds, they were then able to joyously celebrate the greatest surprise of their lives: the Resurrection of **Jesus** from the dead!

## CONCLUSION

This same "surprise of their lives" is available to all today who accept our need of a Savior by dropping our preconceived ideas about earning a worthy place in Christ's Kingdom. We also need to realize our spiritual and moral needs are an even greater priority than our material and social desires. Yet, the wonder of **Jesus'** Resurrection can sometimes be overlooked or lost even to those who are His professed followers.

Little Philip, born with Down's syndrome, attended a third-grade Sunday School class with eight-year-old boys and girls. Typical of that age, the children did not readily accept Philip with his differences. But due to their creative teacher's efforts, they began to care for and accept Philip as part of the group, though not fully. The Sunday after Easter, the teacher brought in L'eggs pantyhose containers that look like large eggs. After each child received one, they were told to go outside on that lovely spring day to find some symbol for the new-life **Jesus** offers to us, which spring's blossoming from the deadness of winter seems to portray, and put it in the egg-like container. Back in the classroom, each container would then be opened.

After running in wild confusion around the property of this rural church, the children returned to the classroom and placed their containers on the table. Their teacher, surrounded by the children, began to open them one-by-one to heighten an atmosphere of surprise. The class collectively "oohed" and "aahed" over the contents of each one—a flower, butterfly, bright green leaf, etc. The teacher then opened one with nothing inside. The children exclaimed things like, "That's stupid. That's not fair. Somebody didn't do their assignment." Philip then spoke up, "That's mine." "Philip, you don't ever do things right!" one student remarked. "There's nothing there!" "I did so do it," Philip insisted. "I did do it. It's empty. Jesus' tomb was empty!"

Silence immediately fell over the other children. From then on, they accepted Philip as a full member of their class. He died not long afterward from an infection most normal children would have shrugged off. At his funeral, this class of eight-year-olds marched up to the casket with their Sunday School teacher. But they did not bring flowers. Each fondly laid an empty pantyhose egg on this earthly tomb of their friend, as a testimony to their confidence in Philip's future resurrection based upon **Jesus'** empty tomb!