**Sermon for Easter Sunday 4th April 2021 at Hanwood**

Isaiah 25.6-9, Acts 10..34-43, Mark 16: 1-8

Do you like surprises? The unexpected? Or do you like everything planned, ordered and predictable? In the past 12 months our village shop in Longden has done vegetable boxes. You say how many people you want it for and they make it up for you. Every time you receive it, you have no idea what is going to be in it - it is a surprise and to be honest I rather enjoy it, it is like Christmas!

On Good Friday we unexpectedly received an Easter present from my twin sister. It was very generous and as we opened it we could feel her love for us. All the more poignant as it was unexpected. Surprises - the unexpected - can be fun.

They can also be very terrifying. Sadly the last 13 months has interrupted life, and left many desolate with no jobs, others ill and bereaved. COVID 19 has been a surprise we did not want.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome were not expecting a surprise when they went to the tomb early that Easter morning. They went prepared to finish what they had started two days before, to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. They had gathered together the necessary spices and ointments, the myrrh - remember the gifts of the wise men? - the linen cloths, and they were steeling themselves for the gruesome task of cleaning and anointing the bruised, whipped and pierced body of Jesus. Not an easy task and especially not easy for one who had so impacted their lives, had shone out with charismatic love and generosity for everyone, had accepted everyone for who they were irrespective of status, had healed, overcome evil spirits, and had even brought people back to life. Such hope now dashed and ground into the dust as they come to do a final act of service for the one who had served them so wholeheartedly.

I wonder, I wonder if they had a small glimmer of hope, a slight insight into God’s plans of redemption, a whisper of the truth that would set them and all mankind free. I wonder if they had a slight skip in their steps. That does not come across in the readings from any of the gospels. Indeed at the end of our reading today they were terrified. And no wonder.

On their way, as they hurried in the early morning, they began to think ahead to what they hoped to do. “Who will roll the stone away for us?” The physical challenges were becoming very real. In their bereaved state, they are focussing on the present, wrapped up in the immediate task, cocooned against further pain, further loss. They have not thought ahead - oh how we all do this in times of huge loss, numbness dulling everything.

In this state of uncertainty they are bewildered to find the stone already pushed to one side. What has happened? Who has done this? What a shock! What further trauma has taken place? Questions and uncertainty. Walk with them those last yards, tentatively- what are you going to find inside the tomb? Things are not as expected.

Surprise! A young man in surprisingly good health, handsome by the sounds of it, well spoken, not a sign of brokenness about him, dressed in a white robe, calmly sitting there. Not the body they expected to find laid out on a cold slab. This man exuded peace, the peace that can only come from God, the peace that declares “I am in control, all is well and will be well.” This man, this angelic being, this messenger of God speaks in their language:

‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’

The angel knows all the details - the crucifixion, the key players, what comes next - and he confidently and with joy delivers his message.

And the women? The women who were surprised? Did they feel that joy? According to Mark, not straight away. They fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Well the amazement must have taken over for the story did get out, and we are privileged to hear it today, to know the amazing ending which was a new beginning. A beginning which Isaiah foretold so many years before and Paul learnt for himself.

Picking up parts of the other readings for today:

A new beginning in which God destroyed  the shroud that is cast over all peoples,

and swallowed up death for ever.

A new beginning in which whoever believes in Jesus - believes that He is God’s Son, who died and rose again - receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

A new beginning in which we can be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

A new beginning in which we can share in the feast that the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples, a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.

This is our heavenly feast promised for us, when we enter eternal life.

I wonder. Do we fully understand this? I do not. There is so much in the death and resurrection of Jesus that I have not grasped with my whole being. I can read of it but there are still many surprises that God has in store for me, unexpected turns in life, which reveal more of his love and glory, his purposes for me. And when my turn comes to leave this life, I will have an even greater surprise- the wonder of meeting Christ face to face, not through a veil thinly, not with social distancing but with a full bear hug of welcome.

I return to my opening question. Do you like surprises? I hope you do and I hope that you are expectant in hoping for more in your faith - a deeper understanding, a closer walk, a whisper into our hearts and minds to warm us, invigorate us, inspire us, a fresh infilling of the grace and Spirit of God. Look for these things and allow yourself to be surprised by God, the one who turns everything upside down.

Amen.

Revd Graham Phillips