

April 4, 2021 Easter Sunday Sermon: Some members of this congregation may recall a syndicated strip that appeared in the cartoon section of the daily newspaper, *"Ripley's Believe it or Not"*. At the peak of its popularity it reached eighty million readers. It featured events and items so strange and peculiar that readers may question the credibility of the claims. Let a few examples suffice.

Did you know...?

- That, the actor originally chosen to play the lead role in the classic film, *Casablanca*, was Ronald Reagan, and not Humphrey Bogart;
- That, a community of nuns in Russia consider Vladimir Putin to be the re-incarnation of Saint Paul; and
- That, noted author John Grisham's manuscript for his first novel, *"A Time to Kill"* was rejected by sixteen publishing houses. Some of them considered the plot too far-fetched and fantastic and therefore not marketable.

The greatest story ever told may be the strangest and most improbable. In the accounts of our Lord's resurrection in the four Gospels, there is surprise. Certainly, the first Christians did not expect Jesus to come back to life after his death on the cross. They were disappointed, discouraged and all their hopes were dashed.

Being hanged on a tree would have seemed like God's judgment on Jesus. Crucifixion was seen by Jews as the death of a criminal and godless man. He was cursed by God. No Jew, however passionately devoted to Jesus they may have been, would ever have dared to identify the Messiah, the anointed one of God, with a crucified man. No wonder that many of Jesus' disciples fled following his execution, returning to their homes and work in Galilee. Even the women who visited the tomb of Jesus on Easter morning did not expect to find him alive at all!

But there was one character who was not surprised: Jesus! He knew that He would rise, never to die again. Earlier in Mark's gospel Jesus said, "And now he began to make it known to them that the Son of Man must be ill-used, and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be put to death, and rise again after three days." (Mk. 8:31)

In John's gospel, Jesus makes a bold declaration: "Destroy this temple (of his body) and in three days I will rise again." (Jn. 2:19)

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ seems almost too good to be true. Even when the Apostles heard the testimony of the women who announced Christ's resurrection, they said, "These words seemed to them idle talk, and they did not believe them." Yet, in a short time, they themselves would suffer martyrdom for their faith in Christ, who was raised from the dead.

God had indeed rescued Jesus. He had raised him up. He did not abandon him in the darkness of death.

In the face of a secular, anti-Christian culture, we are defiant. For us, death has lost its hold over mankind. Death is not the end of the story. It is the beginning of a new chapter. We, as members of the Body of Christ, are destined to live forever. There is life after death; it is life with God!

Just imagine what it would mean if Easter, the Resurrection of Christ, had not taken place.

First, the story of Jesus would have ended abruptly after his crucifixion and burial;

Second, His body would have decayed; and

Third, He would have been rightly considered a has-been, a false Messiah and, understandably, soon forgotten.

Pope Francis likes to speak of God as a God of surprises. The Oxford don and Christian apologist, C.S. Lewis wrote a book about his own conversion. The book's title is *"Surprised by Joy"*.

Some years ago a French scholar and priest, Fracois Varillon, engaged in a dialogue with an atheist who scoffed at the claims of the Christian faith. He claimed that the dogmas of the faith were nonsense. In response, Father Varillon offered a spirited and learned defense of his faith. I fully endorse his words, and hope you as well.

"My deepest yearning is for life: I want to live forever. If you tell me that you are not particularly interested in living forever, I must interrupt our dialogues. All I can say is that I am surely not made like you. I, for one, want to live forever. The resurrection tells me: you will live forever."

Christ lives!

"This is the day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad!

Amen!