Sunday April 15, 1979

"SURPRISED BY JOY" Luke 24:1-11, John 20:19-21, 26-29

Mr. Goldman was about to visit a person whom he had never met. All he knew about the stranger was that he or she was dependent on some kind of life sustaining equipment. The individual's name on the mailbox was K. Sloan.

When he rang the bell, the janitor of the apartment building answered and asked, "Did you ring Sloan?" "Yes," said Mr. Goldman. "Sloan's doorbell rings in my place too," replied the janitor. "Can I see Mr. Sloan?" "There isn't any Mr. Sloan." Is it Mrs. Sloan then? Or Miss?" For some reason Mr. Goldman had assumed Sloan to be a man. "Miss Karen Sloan is her name," said the Janitor. "Am I correct in believing Miss Sloan is an invalid?" asked Mr. Goldman. "You could be," said the janitor, "except she doesn't like being called that. She's quadriplegic, paralyzed throughout her whole body. She's been that way since age 15."

The janitor showed the visitor the way to Karen Sloan's apartment on the 6th floor. Long afterwards, Mr. Goldman would remember this moment, the first in which he ever saw Karen Sloan. She was a mature woman, but appeared young and was extraordinarily beautiful. He guessed her age at 36, but learned later that she was 39. She was strikingly beautiful. And she was in a wheelchair. A bulge in her dress showed that a respirator was underneath it, breathing for her. A tube, emerging below the dress hemline was connected to a suitcase-like device secured to the rear of the chair. The respirator emitted a steady hum along with a hiss of air, inward and out, at the normal pace of breathing. The chair's electric components were connected by a cord to a wall power outlet.

Karen Sloan asked her visitor to be seated. He wasn't sure what he had expected, but this exquisite woman before him was completely different. She moved her head slightly, putting her mouth to a plastic tube extending on a goose-neck. She blew softly into the tube and at once her wheelchair swung around as she was facing him directly. She explained that her head was the only part of her that she could move and that she controlled the wheelchair by blowing into the little tube.

As they talked, Mr. Goldman learned that Karen Sloan had been stricken with poliomyelitis just one year before the Salk vaccine went into widespread use and with Sabin vaccine a few years later, wiped polio from the landscape.

"My bug bit too soon," Karen explained, "I didn't get in under the wire." "Do you think about that one year much?" asked Mr. Goldman. "I used to a lot," she said, "For awhile I cried over that one-year difference. I'd ask, why did I have to be one of the last few? And I'd think, if only the vaccine had come just a little sooner, everything would have been different. I'd have walked, danced, been able to write, use my hands. Then I got to telling myself; wishing won't change anything. What happened, happened. I can't be undone. So I started making the best of what there was, living a day at a time, and when you do that, if something unexpected happens, you're grateful. I'm often surprised by joy in my life.

For twelve years, Karen Sloan had been cared for in hospitals, much of that time in an old-fashioned iron lung. Then more modern portable equipment was developed, making it possible for patients like herself to live away from institutions. At first she had gone back to live with her parents, but that hadn't worked. It was too much strain on all of them. Then she moved to this apartment where she had been for nearly eleven years. Although Karen could do almost nothing for herself, and had to be washed, fed, and put to bed by someone else, she had learned to paint, holding a brush in her mouth. And she could use an electric typewriter by working it with a stick in her teeth. Sometimes she wrote poetry.

The visitor to Karen Sloan that day had never been as surprised by joy as he was then. He had come to the apartment expecting an invalid man and had found a happy beautiful woman who had come to terms with her life in a way he had never known before. He had seen a joy on her face that was simply beautiful. It was the joy of a person who had suffered a great deal and had learned from it. It may be that it is almost impossible to learn anything important at all in this world without suffering.

She talked about being surprised by joy in her own life. But it was also the visitor who had really been surprised by joy. True joy is always a surprise. It's something we can't automatically produce or manufacture or manipulate. It's only something we can be open to.

Surprised by joy! That's what happened to the women who went to the tomb on the first Easter Sunday morning. They went to the tomb because of their love and devotion for Jesus. They wanted to more adequately prepare Jesus' body for burial. They went in sadness, but were surprised by joy. Expecting to find death, they found life.

Later in the evening on that same Easter day, as the Gospel of John reports, some of the disciples were in a room together, with the door locked because they were afraid and Jesus came and stood among them. In their fear and sadness they were surprised by joy. Thomas was one of the disciples not there that night. When he heard what had happened, he did not believe it. Eight days later, however, when the disciples were together again and Thomas was with them, Jesus appeared among them again. And this time he specifically showed Thomas the nail marks in his hands and feet and the mark on his side. Now it was Thomas' turn to be surprised by joy, and he was!

Easter tells us that we can be surprised by joy in the midst of sadness, fear or doubt. True joy is always a surprise. Where we expect death we can find life. And not only does this happen in a personal way to us as individuals, but the Gospel message of Easter reminds us that God surprises us in history as well. The Easter event is the culmination, the high point of many other surprises in the Bible. History is more than repetition because God keeps breaking in with something new.

Israel itself is a surprise among the nations. Abraham is told that he is to be the father of a great nation, but he and his wife Sarah have no children. How can one be a father without children? Then at age 99 and with his wife well past child-bearing age, he is told they will have a child. His wife laughs! Surprise! Isaac is born and the promise lives.

Later the little nation's future seems in question because of captivity in Egypt. Egypt has all the guns, all the money, all the power, enough to enslave these people forever. But surprise! Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt.

Other surprises--David wins against Goliath. Jimmy the Greek on that day would not have given the odds in favor of David. Nor would anyone have given the odds to Jesus

hanging on a cross. Rome with its power and glory--that's who would survive. But not so! A man born to obscure parents in Galilee becomes the most unforgettable character ever to walk the earth. His closest followers are not people of power in the usual worldly sense, yet they rise up and turn the world upside down. Surprise! Christ is put to death on a instrument of shame, but that cross becomes a cherished symbol of invincible love. Surprise! Surprise!

God's surprises never end! Easter happens every day in many ways. Who would have thought than an unimpressive wisp of a man, clad in a loincloth and carrying a bamboo stick would be the one to set India free from foreign domination. Surprise!

Who would've thought that a tired black woman pressing for a seat on an Alabama bus would ignite a social revolution? Surprise! Those who remember Orval Faubus at all will recall him as the Arkansas governor who in 1957, called out the National Guard to repulse nine black children trying to enroll in Little Rock's Central High School. In 1957, Coretta Scott King was the obscure wife of a 28 year old black preacher who had just begun to win some small battles. The tides of change that swept Mr. Faubus from view swept Mrs. King tragically to prominence.

After two decades of observing the American civil-rights struggle, one cannot help but notice the differing fates that have befallen the principal characters in the integration drama of the 1960's. Many of the blacks who were underdogs then have flourished, while the segregationists who thought they had all the power when they confronted the black rebels at the schoolhouse doors and at the all-white restaurants and elsewhere have foundered. Surprise!

Remember Lester Maddox, the stalwart segregationist who rode a wave of racism into the Georgia governorship. He now sits in his real estate office subdued by a heart attack and seriously in debt. Remember James G. Clark, the sheriff who stood tall for the sorces of segregation at Selma, Alabama. The former sheriff was recently scheduled to start a two year sentence for his part in smuggling marijuana into Alabama, but the judge delayed the start of the sentence so Mr. Clark should face fraud charges stemming from an allegedly phony loan scheme in New York. Surprise!

Yet maybe it shouldn't surprise us. The Bible says-"God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree." These surprises are the workings of God. Easter means that God's kingdom is at work among us. Easter takes place over and over again. We are continually being surprised by joy. Just when we think we have things all figured out and trust in our own worldly power, just when we think the tomb is all sealed up; the stone is rolled away. Surprise!

Jesus' teachings and parables are filled with the same kind of surprises. In the parable of the good Samaritan, for example, the one who performs the good act is the one least expected to do so. Our expectations are turned upside down. The story has a surprise ending. Those who first heard the parable did not expect that a Samaritan would do a good deed for anyone, particularly for a Jew.

Easter, like the rest of Christ's life, speaks of God's surprises. It shatters our usual perception of the way we think things are. God's surprises are not offered to make us jittery or uncomfortable, but to keep us open, expectant and prepared. "Watch therefore," said Jesus, "For you know neither the day nor the hour."

Also remember that God's surprises are not to everyone surprises of Joy. To those who wanted to do away with Jesus, the resurrection was not being surprised by joy, but was being surprised by fear, panic, dread, alarm.

In the civil rights movement and its aftermath, not everyone was surprised by joy. Those who were open enough to accept the fact that God was speaking and working through the blacks' demand for equal justice, were surprised by Joy. Those who could not be open to this fact were surprised, but not by joy. We can be among those who are surprised by joy if we remember that God is usually working through those who suffer and not those who make others suffer.

The Christ who hung upon the cross was a victim, not an executioner; he was the quarry, not the hunter, and his death and resurrection proclaims the love of God who not only suffers with us, but for us.

You, too, can be surprised by joy, not only on this Easter day 1979, but throughout your life if you remain open to where God might be working. Your world and your way of looking at things will often be turned upside down, but that's always part of being surprised by joy!