Easter Sunday, April 19, 1992
THE EASTER SURPRISE
Luke 24:1-11

Several faithful women picked their way along a rocky path in the early dawn. The sun was beginning to rise as one of them said, “It’s dangerous coming here this morning. The authorities will stop at nothing to destroy us all.” A second woman added, “Suppose the tomb is guarded and we cannot get near it.” Another responded, “We’ll simply have to do our best to persuade the guards that because of our love and devotion for Jesus, we have come to properly prepare his body for burial.” “But who will move the large stone away from the opening of the tomb?” asked the youngest woman.

According to the gospel accounts, we don’t know exactly how many women were in that small group. Each gospel story suggests a different number.

Now let’s switch the scene forward to this Easter morning in our own century. The alarm clock went off, and Bill Evans pulled the pillow tightly around his ears. This was the same futile gesture he went through every morning. He struck out blindly with his arm and sent the clock crashing to the floor, where it continued to ring under the bed. He leaned over, groped aimlessly until he found it, and shut it off.

Bill tried to get back to sleep, but couldn’t. He got up, looked for his slippers, finally put on his old shoes without the laces, and stumbled toward the front door. He opened the door, picked up the Sunday paper, and as he did, the dog scooted in. He went into the living room and settled back into his favorite chair to read the sports page.

“Before you get too comfortable, remember this is Easter, and we’re going to church together,” said his wife from another room. Bill slumped back into his chair. He wasn’t too excited about going to an Easter worship service.

Reluctantly, he showered, shaved, got dressed, gulped down a cup of coffee, and backed the car out of the garage. They were on their way to church.

Despite some obvious differences, the women on the way to the tomb on that first Easter Sunday morning and Bill Evans going to an Easter worship service in our time have a lot in common.

In the first place, both the women on that first Easter and Bill Evans in our century expected nothing unusual to happen. They were not anticipating any surprises. The women went to the tomb because of their devotion, and Bill went to church out of a sense of duty. The women, however, were met with a surprise. The stone had been moved away, the tomb was empty, and they were told that Christ had risen. Later that day and throughout the coming weeks, the women’s lives were changed forever.

It probably won’t happen quite that way for Bill Evans and many like him on this Easter Sunday morning. Bill and others will be told that Christ is risen, but they’ve heard that before and are not sure what difference that makes in their day-to-day living. Yet, there is a chance that, beginning today, Bill’s life and yours will meet with a surprise, and it will be the start of a changed life and a new way of looking at the world.

Secondly, even though the women on that first Easter saw that the tomb was empty and they began to believe that Christ was risen, they were not at first sure what difference this would make in their lives. Later in the day, when additional followers of Jesus were told that he had been raised from the dead, Luke says that some of them didn't believe it but thought it an idle tale. And later, when some of them experienced the presence of the risen Christ, they began to believe but were not sure what the implications were for them. We are told in the Gospel of John that Peter, at one point after the resurrection, decided to go back to his fishing business. So at first, he was evidently not much impressed by the events of Easter.

So it is with Bill Evans and many others in today's world. In the same way as the women who went to the tomb and like many other early followers of Jesus, Bill may even believe that something unusual took place that first Easter. He may acknowledge that Christ somehow overcame death. But what's all this that happened so long ago got to do with him in today's world? Is it any help to him in dealing with his everyday problems?

A man once stood looking at the Grand Canyon. As he gazed out at the breathtaking immensity and beauty of this wonder of nature, he said, "Something must have happened here."

Obviously, something happened, and it wasn't just some individual dragging a stick along behind him as he walked, or thousands of individuals dragging sticks. Something happened.

As we think about the mystery and miracle of the resurrection story on that first Easter, we may not understand exactly what happened or how, and we will never know all the details. But we do know that something extraordinary happened on that first Easter, and it was a big surprise to everyone. The first part of the surprise was this: the women had come to the tomb expecting to find death but were surprised by life.

But what does this surprise mean? On one level, it means that there is something eternal about life, not only the life of Jesus but your life and mine, that transcends even death. Death is not the ultimate power.

However, on a deeper level, the surprise is even bigger than that. The implications of the empty tomb are more profound and far-reaching. When the women and men who had been followers of Jesus began to live with the resurrection, they discovered that it made all the difference in their lives in the here and now. It was more than something about life after death.

Perhaps our biggest mistake is that we try to understand and think of immortality in terms of time. For too many Christians, it has been a matter of the future located in a place called "heaven." It has been tomorrow, another life, a future existence. But the great truth and surprise of Easter is that you are immortal right now. Immortality has nothing to do with time. It is beyond time. It is in another dimension.

The surprise of Easter comes again and again in those immortal moments with persons or nature, or art or music, or compassion, or literature, or prayer — those breakthrough moments of doxology and "glad to be alive," those moments when, in an experience of love or trust or peace, you are living beyond death. Death has no dominion, no power over you in those moments when you realize that nothing can separate you from the love of God.

The second part of the surprise of Easter is that it gave the earlier followers of Jesus, and it gives us, a whole new way of seeing, understanding, and living our lives.

The problem is it's not easy to quickly change one's point of view, one's assumptions, one's way of looking at the world, and one's understanding of God.

Someone has said that there are three kinds of people: those who see, those who see when they are shown, and those who do not see or refuse to see. Jesus saw; the early followers of Jesus saw when they were shown — they were open to new possibilities — but there were and still are multitudes of people who never see. Although, when I think about it, I am not sure that there are people who never see. I believe that everyone can see if they are properly shown and if it happens at the right time. There are "teachable" moments in each one of our lives, and they often come at surprising times.

Throughout the life and teachings of Jesus, he was always helping people to see God and themselves in new ways. He was always inviting people to follow him into a greater awareness of what life with God and in God's creation is all about.

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10:10). He wanted to show us what life truly is. Life to the average person consists of birth, emotions, eating, drinking, working, business, pleasure, hoping, wishing, sleeping, worrying, hating, fighting, hoarding, dominating, winning, losing, disappointment, and death. We often say in the face of some limitation, "Well, that's life for you." But it is not life at all. It is but a small fragment of life whose full potential has been frustrated. Life is God, and life is boundless.

Looking at the empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus, and the great possibilities of life that they reveal for all of us, we could say, and we should, "That's life for you." Through the resurrection, Jesus proved conclusively that the life of God is indestructible, always open to new possibilities, and eternal.

So, Bill Evans, maybe you think that isn't much. But I can only say to you that the more I look at the center of Christianity, and the empty tomb is at its center, the more I am certain in my own faith and mind that there is a message to people here about what God is actually doing in daily life, here and now, as people walk and talk, eat and celebrate, suffer and rejoice. The power of the risen Christ is within us and among us. Easter is the story of how disheartened, unnerved, existing people became hopeful, creative, loving people, unafraid of anything that life or death had to offer. And that is still happening to persons every day. Easter says life is for living. It is not so important what happens around us or even to us. What counts is what happens in us.

The risen Christ is present in us, and we can help him be resurrected in others. A minister had the habit of going to a local jail twice a week to be a friend to the inmates. He found in that jail an inmate who was different. He tried to communicate with him, but couldn't. He gave him the same little gifts that he gave to everyone else. But this inmate never said anything, never thanked the visitor, never gave any sign of appreciation at all. This went on for six months. One day, when the minister came into the jail and gave this inmate some toothpaste, the inmate smiled. The next time the minister went to the jail, this prisoner was standing in the narrow doorway that led to the cells. The minister had to pass through that door, but couldn't because of the prisoner. He dared to touch the inmate on the shoulder and, as he touched him, said, "How is good Julian today?" The reaction was surprising. The prisoner jumped back and said, "Pastor, I'm no good." The pastor asked, "What do you mean, Julian?" It was their first conversation ever. Julian said, "I'm a criminal. I have a sentence of twenty years. I

probably will spend all my life in jail. I have no friends. My family doesn't want to visit me or to know anything about me. I have no lawyer, and I'm doomed."

Julian was a very strong man, and all the inmates were afraid of him. He had a brutal appearance, with tattoos all over his body. The minister said, "I don't think you want to hurt me." Again, Julian was amazed. He looked at the pastor and said, "No way will I hurt you, and while I am here in this jail, nobody's going to hurt you." Then, without realizing what he was saying, the minister pointed his finger at Julian and said, "Therefore, Julian, at least toward me, you have a good heart." At that moment, Julian opened his big eyes in awe. He was speechless.

After that day, something began to happen in Julian. Without asking, he became the in-house assistant to the minister and his bodyguard. After three or four weeks, the guards asked the pastor, "What did you do to Julian?" The minister replied, "Nothing." Julian began to smile and talk with other inmates.

As the minister thought about this over the next months and years, he understood what had happened with Julian. For the first time in his life, someone he respected had looked at him and said, "Julian, you have a good heart." Julian looked inside himself and saw that he really did have a good heart. Before that, he would look inside and see that he was a criminal, that he was full of anger, that he had no friends, that his family didn't want to know anything about him, that he was doomed to be in jail the rest of his life. Did the minister put the good heart into Julian? No, it was already there. It was buried. But now it was resurrected. That's what Easter is all about.

Every year on Easter morning in churches around the world, millions of people proclaim the words, "Christ is risen, hallelujah." If only each one of us could catch the grand implications of that statement. Christ is risen also means that Christ is risen in you and in me and in every other person in the world. And once we accept that fact, we are never the same. Amen.