



“Gotcha!”

Texts: John 20:1-18 and Acts 10:34-43

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

I don't remember the year, or exactly how old I was, but there was a strange Easter in my Western Pennsylvania homeland many years ago. The Easter preparations had been made in earnest. The eggs were dyed, the baskets had been set out for the bunny, and we went to our beds on a springtime night, while visions of jelly beans danced in our heads, and we prepared for the joy of the next day. When we woke on Easter morning, we were greeted by two feet of snow. This happened in the days before the intricacies of weather radar and the advanced warnings of weather events we receive today. In those days, if it snowed, it snowed, and you simply dealt with it. I imagine that there was considerable discussion about the fate of the Easter services. Sunrise services (we actually had whose back then) were cancelled. The fate of the two morning services hung in the balance. The powers that be decided it would be nearly heretical to cancel Easter, so everything went on as planned, with significantly smaller congregations than had been anticipated and a choir that sounded more than a little on the “thin” side. An Easter blizzard. Gotcha!

My former pastor and mentor, the late Dr. Richard M. Cromie, used to tell the story of “the man who missed Easter.” Dick had gotten home in the early afternoon, following morning Easter services and a few stops afterward. When he pulled into his driveway, he saw his neighbor and greeted him. “How’s it going today, Rev?” the neighbor asked. Dick said, “Oh, we had two great services this morning, beautiful music, big crowds. There were beautiful lilies and everyone looked so fine.” “Uh, Rev?” the neighbor asked. “Was this Easter?” “Of course it’s Easter,” Dick replied. “Oh my God,” the neighbor said. “I missed it.” The neighbor’s life had been swallowed up in the worries of so many things. His wife had recently died. The world was a strange place. He had gone for a morning drive, stopped for some breakfast, and returned home to his empty house. Distracted by the puzzlement that is sometimes life, he missed Easter. Gotcha!

It’s a little strange to celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord on a day when tricksters are at their work. I checked my place, up here in the chancel, this morning, for fear that some renegade choristers may have placed a whoopee cushion in an opportune place. I’m nearly afraid to take a sip of water, for fear than someone has filled a dribble glass and placed it here for my benefit. It is a day, when at some point, someone will get us and say, “Gotcha!”

The gospel story from John, with which we began the service, and which is depicted in the Tiffany Window here in our sanctuary, is the story of Mary Magdalene, coming to the tomb, early on the first day of the week. Her grief was real and raw. She had come to the tomb for her own reasons and John’s gospel does not tell us what they were. But she was broken-hearted and filled with the pain and sorrow that a sudden death always brings.

She arrived at the tomb and things were not as they should have been. The stone covering the door, was removed. She ran back to where the disciples were in hiding with the news that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. Peter and the “other disciple” (tradition tells us it was John) ran to the tomb, saw what Mary had seen, and returned to their concealment.

Mary, however, stayed near the tomb. On looking in, she saw two angels in white, only confusing her all the more. They asked her why she was weeping. She gave them her answer: “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” They give her no other information, according to the gospel account.

But Mary turns and sees a person she believes to be the gardener. In an intentional spoiler, the gospel tells us that it was Jesus. They converse as they had undoubtedly conversed many times, but Mary never realized with whom she was speaking. Grief and a broken spirit can do that to you. Finally, Jesus speaks her name: “Mary!” And she realizes that it is Jesus. “Mary!” Jesus could have said, “Gotcha!”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's ultimate surprise.

We thought we had the last word on Jesus. We didn't want his message. We weren't interested in what he came to bring us. We didn't want to make the changes and the sacrifices that are inherent in being part of the whole Jesus thing.

We wanted to be in charge. We wanted to take what we could get. We wanted God to back off and allow us to take over. And the truth is that, most of the time, we still do. We believe that we know better than God.

And so, in order to silence the message, we silenced the messenger. We - and make no mistake, everything that happened then would happen now with our help - we colluded with religious and political authorities to kill Jesus and have things our way. We were there - through the abandonment, the injustice of a mock trial, the torture, and the execution. We cannot be separated from any of it. Humanity rejected God and killed God's messenger.

But...

God had the last word. I'll let you in on a little secret: God always has the last word. God had the last word and that last word was "Oh no you don't. You thought you had shut me up? I'm ba-a-a-ack!" "Gotcha!"

And there is the good news of Easter. Considering what we had done to Jesus Christ, God had every right to wash the divine hands of us. We had rejected God and we sought to take from God that which was God's alone - namely, the authority over all things in creation. We planned a coup d'état against God. We conspired against God to eliminate God from any involvement in this world.

And our efforts failed gloriously! God raised Jesus from the dead and in that action, displayed for us and for all the world to see, that God is not vindictive, spiteful, resentful, or malevolent, but merciful, compassionate, gracious, and forgiving. In the resurrection of Jesus, we see who God truly is - a God of love, who is capable of the most supreme act of forgiveness and love. In the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we see God gifting us with a new beginning, a fresh start, a new and - dare we even think it? - eternal life.

Just when we think that we're in the worst trouble we could ever be in,

just when we think that a judgment is about to be passed on us
that will make things worse than we can imagine,
just when we think that an unpardonable act has been committed
and we are standing, awaiting condemnation,

God says, "Gotcha!" The tomb is empty! Christ is risen! You have been forgiven! Go, and forgive. You have been restored! Go, and restore! You have been given new life! Go, and offer that new life to everyone you meet!

Mark Twain, my sometimes alter-ego, has a wonderful statement for the day. Twain says, “This is the day upon which we are reminded of what we are on the other three hundred and sixty-four.” He was speaking of April Fools’ Day. But it is true of Easter as well. On Easter, we are reminded that we are people of the resurrection, which is true on the other three hundred and sixty-four as well.

On this strange and wondrous day, when we celebrate the Resurrection of the Lord, and play a good-natured prank or two, the word for the day is “Gotcha!” God has surprised us in raising Jesus from the dead! “Gotcha!” And we have been given the good news to surprise a weary world. “Gotcha!”

Christ is risen! God got us with a good one. And we are not the same.

Not now and not forevermore. Amen.



First
Presbyterian
Church

609 South East Second Street
Evansville, IN 47713
(812) 423-6297
www.firstpresevansville.com

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is a partner congregation with
the Covenant Network
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