

When God Does The Utterly Unexpected

Rich Nathan
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Easter Weekend
Luke 24:13-35

Next week I will begin a new series on the book of Revelation. Revelation is one of those books that has intrigued people for 2000 years. A lot of people stay away from it because they don't feel adequate to understand its message. On the other hand are lots of books written on the book of Revelation like the Tim LaHaye's *Left Behind* Series or Hal Lindsay's *The Late Great Planet Earth*. So next week I will be starting a series on Revelation.

But this Easter I would like to begin by sharing with you an interesting experiment that was done by two psychologists back in 1949. The experiment had to do with people's ability to recognize facts that were contrary to their expectations. What these psychologists did was to expose subjects to what looked like a normal deck of playing cards. The psychologists would quickly flip through the deck and ask the subject to identify the playing card.

"Well, that is a seven of hearts."
"That is a six of clubs."

What these psychologists did though was slip into the deck abnormal playing cards. For example, they would slip in a red six of spades, or a black four of hearts. When the psychologist ran through these cards quickly, none of the subjects realized that there was anything abnormal about any of the cards. They simply fit the abnormal cards into their expectations regarding playing cards.

But then the psychologists went through the cards again, this time a bit more slowly. Many of the subjects began to realize that something was abnormal. What they were seeing didn't fit into their expectations or their prior categories. The subject would say, "Well, that is a six of spades, but it has a red border.

When they ran through the experiment again even more slowly, many of the subjects had an "Ah-ha" moment. They realized that many of the playing cards had something abnormal about them and they were able to correctly identify them. They said, "That's a six of spades, but it is the wrong color. It is red."

"That is a four of hearts, but it is the wrong color. It is black."

The interesting thing was that about 10% of the subjects never caught on. They simply weren't able to adjust their prior categories. They weren't able to perceive the utterly unexpected.

Some of the long-time members of the Vineyard have been friends for years with a man named Mike. When Mike was five years old, he was diagnosed with epilepsy. Mike suffered with epilepsy for 25 years. By his mid-20's, Mike was having three gran mal seizures a week and hundreds of petit mal seizures as well. Mike was taking 62 pills a day in a medically futile attempt to control his seizures.

His seizures had become so bad and so frequent that neurologists at OSU were taking about cutting Mike's brain in two, cutting through the corpus callosum activity between the spheres that was causing the seizures. They told Mike that this was an extreme operation and that he would have to undergo several years of therapy to regain his normal functioning.

Mike was desperate. His life was wrecked. He would come to church and his face was often bruised and battered from his falling in the street as a result of a seizure. He was afraid of the operation, which doctors said was inevitable. He was working as an orderly at the OSU Hospital, but they were threatening to fire him because they said he was a danger to himself and to the patients.

Mike, of course, had no driver's license. The drugs constantly made him feel doped up. It was hard for him to concentrate and focus.

Mike received prayer from two Christian men back in 1989. He said that as these two men prayed for him, it felt like a tornado was going through his body. They prayed for him for about an hour. When they got done, Mike felt very different. From the moment those two men prayed for him in 1989 until today, Mike never had another gran mal seizure again. His brain wave activity, which was measured by an EEG, radically changed.

Because he didn't have seizures any longer, he has been able to get a driver's license. You never saw a happier guy drive up to church than Mike when he came to church driving his new car. He came into the parking lot honking his horn. He said, "Rich, come check it out. I'm driving." Because his seizures had stopped, the doctors weaned him off the medications. He met a lovely young woman in our church, got married, and advanced in his career.

A few years after the seizures stopped, Mike sat down with a neurologist who had studied his case for years. Mike described the prayer session that he had with the two Christian men. He described the feeling that he had when the men prayed for him, and it was clear that his seizures had stopped. He asked the neurologist what he thought about the prayer explanation for his healing. The neurologist, Mike said, gave him a little condescending smile and said, "Oh, Mike. That is not the reason you are no longer having seizures. Don't you see the medication finally kicked in?"

62 pills a day. He was taking medication for 20 years. But like the subjects in the card playing experiment, this neurologist saw only what he expected to see and was resistant to changing his prior categories.

Let me tell you one more story that has just occurred in our church in the last month. This is from a woman named Jean. She writes:

Dear Pastor Rich,

Years ago I was diagnosed with cancer. An inoperable grapefruit-size tumor was on my ovary with tentacles spiraling up my spine. At the time of my diagnosis, I was a 22-year old woman, broken and full of despair. Thankfully, Jesus met me in the depths of my pain and gave me hope. Physically, I still had cancer. But I discovered that Jesus certainly sits at the bedside of cancer patients and I learned to lean on his adequacy.

Since I was diagnosed, I've always talked about my faith. For years, I've visited cancer patients (as one of them) to share the Gospel. People have known me as "the Christian girl with cancer." Dealing with cancer has truly been the means by which God has brought me great blessings. For many years it was the means that God had for me to share my faith and the hope Jesus has for all of us, even when we are sick.

After years of being inoperable, my tumor began to change, making me a candidate for surgery. I was scheduled for surgery, but was nervous because of the many risks involved in such a delicate procedure. On Sunday, Feb. 27th, at the 11:30 a.m. service here at the Vineyard, you called for women who had tumors or cancerous masses in their bodies to come forward for prayer. I went forward with a heavy heart and tears streaming down my face to receive pray.

A sweet lady named Jeanine prayed for me. I thought she would pray that my fears would be settled and that I would have peace about the surgery. Much to my surprise, she instead prayed that the tumor would be cast into the depths never to be seen again. Her words were not fancy, but I felt the presence of God.

My boyfriend and I clung to our seed of faith that I would be healed before surgery. Anyway, I went to the hospital for a CAT-scan. Before I went to the hospital I prayed. I told God that no matter what the results, I wouldn't be disappointed and that I would still be his friend. When I got into the tube, I was nervous because I heard an overhead page for the radiologist. A few minutes later, they paged my doctor. I didn't know what was going on, but I assumed it wasn't good. I thought they were going to tell me that they wanted to do the surgery immediately because something bad had happened.

It is the case, isn't it friends, that we fit our experiences into prior categories. We see what we expect to see.

Surprisingly, I wasn't fearful at the idea of having emergency surgery, but I wished I had shaved my legs (silly, I know). Well, my doctor consulted with the radiologist and they agreed to take me for an ultrasound. At that point, I didn't know what was happening. While they were doing the ultrasound, they were talking to each other. I couldn't take it any longer. I interrupted them to find out what the problem was. My doctor smiled, and with a big smile, he said, "Sweetheart, I can't explain it all. But we can't find your tumor. It is simply gone."

I just started crying. My doctor asked me to have a few more blood tests to see if there are cancer cells lingering elsewhere. I'll write to you when I get the results.

And then just last weekend, Jean wrote to me with this note:

Dear Pastor Rich,

Happy, happy, joy, joy! My blood work results came back absolutely normal. No sign of cancer at all. So it is official. As of March 17, 2005 I am in complete remission. Yippee!

You know, I've been blessed because Jesus has been with me through all the years of therapy and medication. Recently, it has been awesome to have so many people talk to me about my faith. People who have not shown interest before are now asking questions about Jesus. It is incredible. People who have known me for years and have seen me at my sickest times, are now astonished by a miracle. I am in awe that God would use someone like me. I am overwhelmed that he has been as merciful and gracious to such a creature as me.

Isn't that fantastic? I wanted to share Jean's story with you because it just happened in the last month in this church.

What does all of this have to do with Easter, or the resurrection of Christ? The critics of Christianity are fond of saying that the claims by Jesus' disciples that Jesus was alive was nothing more than psychological wish fulfillment. The disciples wanted to believe so badly that their leader had not left them, that they projected this wish onto reality and began to tell everyone who would listen that they saw Jesus risen from the dead.

Is that true? Was the proclamation of the resurrection nothing other than psychological wish fulfillment? Let's read the scriptures. It says in Luke 24:13-16:

Luke 24:13-16

Now that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem. They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them; but they were kept from recognizing him.

N.T. Wright, who may be the most important New Testament scholar in the world today, wrote a massive 817 page book two years ago titled *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. This book serves as a complete refutation to the argument that the reports of resurrection made by Jesus' disciples were nothing other than psychological wish fulfillment. In fact, as NT Wright painstakingly points out, nothing in the disciples experience or prior belief prepared them for the stunning new truth that Jesus, their leader who died on a cross on Good Friday, was physically alive in a transformed body on Sunday.

The Bible says that they didn't recognize him. They didn't expect his sudden appearance to the two men on the road to Emmaus. This was not what they were wanting, hoping, or praying for. Jesus' followers knew that dead people stayed dead. Judaism in their day taught that at the end of time, God would raise all of the dead to new life. But nothing in the Judaism of their day, nothing in the mythology of the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Persians, or any other stories in the ancient world prepared the disciples for this one stunning new fact: The resurrection of just one person, not at the end of time, but in the middle of history.

In raising Christ from the dead, God did the utterly unexpected. He shattered prior categories. And this same God who raised Christ from the dead, continues to do the utterly unexpected today. God gave the utterly unexpected in Mike's life, the man I told you about who had epileptic seizures for 20 years. God did the utterly unexpected in Jean's life, the woman who had a grapefruit-size tumor in her body that suddenly and instantaneously disappeared.

You know, the reality of your faith this Easter can be found by whether you believe God can and indeed God wants to do the utterly unexpected in your life. Do you believe that God wants to do the utterly unexpected in the lives of your loved ones? Do you believe that God wants to do the utterly unexpected in your marriage, or in the marriages of those around you? Do you believe God might want to do the utterly unexpected through you? Must life continue to proceed according to fixed laws year after year, one thing inevitably following another? Or do you believe this Easter in the God of surprises? That God can intervene and inevitably break the iron chain? Do you believe in the God who can do the utterly unexpected?

I've called this Easter weekend's talk, "When God Does the Utterly Unexpected." Let's pray.

Why don't we believe in a God who does the utterly unexpected? Certainly, concerning these two, their religious training was a barrier to keep them from believing that Jesus who died on Friday could be physically alive in a transformed body on Sunday. See, the religious leaders of their day taught that Messiah would come as a conquering King to kill all the enemies of the Jews. They were looking for the entire overthrow of the Roman Empire and the establishment of Israel as the reigning kingdom on the earth. When they saw Jesus on the cross, and they saw him killed, their religious training froze them into a state of unbelief. As I said before, none of the followers of Jesus ever expected him to rise from the dead.

I wonder how many of you have been negatively impacted by your religious training. Many people reject their religious training and they think they've rejected true Christianity. Some of you are in that position today. You dismiss Christianity because you think you already know the truth. Your prior negative experiences with church have conditioned your expectations so that you no longer believe in the God who can do the utterly unexpected. Some of you were raised in churches that were incredibly judgmental. Some of you have experienced church life that was condemning or you've been in churches that excluded people or hurt people.

A dear member of our church was raised in a religious Catholic family. He was the oldest of 7-8 siblings. His very devoted parents sent him off to Catholic seminary as a teenager, where he was sexually abused not only by several other students, but also by a few of the faculty who were Catholic priests. This happened more than 20 years ago, before all the scandal broke out in the Roman Catholic church. He talked with the rector about his experience believing that the rector would assist him. What he didn't know was that the rector was also involved in sexually abusing teenage boys.

The rector immediately called this young man's parents and told them that their son was having paranoid experiences, falsely accusing priests of doing terrible things. Because this was in the day before sexual abuse was exposed, his very religious parents trusted the rector and believed that their own son was lying to them.

So this young man plunged himself into a life of complete dissipation. He ran from church and ran from God as hard as he could. He got involved in massive immorality until he discovered that he had the AIDS virus. By God's grace, this young man came back to God and is an active member of the Vineyard today.

Many people have spent their entire lives by running from church and from God because their prior experience with church was exceedingly negative and so they think there is nothing further to explore in real Christianity. And I know that this is going to come as a surprise to some of you, but being a non-Christian is not just for the irreligious, those who say, "I don't have to obey anything but myself. I'm sick and tired of church." Do you know you can be a religious non-Christian? You can be raised in church, go through catechism, be baptized, attend Sunday School, and end up simply being a religious non-Christian.

There are many of you who are here today who have gotten a massive dose of religion growing up. You've got a massive injection of what I would call, "churchianity." But your life has never been intruded upon by the God who does the utterly unexpected. I talk with so many folks who say: "Oh yes, I was an altar boy growing up." Or "My grandfather was a Methodist pastor." It seems like every young Catholic person I ever talk with was an altar boy or altar girl, and every Methodist has some relative in the past who was a pastor. So many folks are inoculated, as it were, with the dead virus of religion so that it is really difficult for you to catch the real thing – a living, vital relationship with Jesus.

When I speak about being religious non-Christians, I mean that many of you have as a basic spiritual foundation for your life the idea that if you are good enough, and you obey enough, God will accept you. I can't tell you how many people I talk with who've said: Well, I really tried to be a good person. I've been a good mom, or a good dad. I try hard not to hurt people. I think God will accept me because I've been a good person.

I've said many times, Christianity is not fundamentally a religion. Religion won't really ever change your life. Christianity is a vital, life-changing relationship with a person named Jesus. Religion is all about dos and don'ts and how to become a moral person – not sleeping with your boyfriend or girlfriend, trying to be a good mom or dad or a good person. Religion is all about what you must do. True Christianity is an utterly unexpected message from God. At its foundation, true Christianity is not about what you must do, it is what Jesus has done. Instead of God saying to you, "Here are the things you must do to be accepted by me – you need to go to church; pray this prayer; say this liturgy – the unexpected message of God in true Christianity focuses instead on what Jesus has done for you.

Christianity is all about Jesus – not all about you! It is not about your moral achievement or my moral achievement. Christianity is the unexpected message that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God has done everything necessary to accomplish salvation for you and for me. True Christianity is the wildly unexpected message that acceptance with God is a gift to be received simply by your faith and my faith. This wildly unexpected message that everything that needs to be done for you and me to be saved has been done in Jesus Christ. All we need to do is trust in Christ.

There are so many religious non-Christians who say: Yes, if I obey I will be accepted; whereas a true Christian says, "Because I am accepted by grace, I will respond in obedience."

Some people find it hard to believe in the God who does the utterly unexpected because they are waiting around to have a particular kind of spiritual experience. They are what I call "mystical non-Christians." They are looking for an overwhelming religious experience before they believe. Some of you have been searching for years for this religious experience. You want to be swept away by some experience of the kind that some family member, a spouse, or a friend has described to you. Many people are waiting around to be hit by spiritual lightening.

You say: Well, I suppose if I got hit, if I were overwhelmed by some spiritual experience of God, then I guess I would become a Christian. But I first need to feel what other people feel. The mystical non-Christian has the wrong foundation for faith. The foundation for your faith is not whether you've had a certain kind of spiritual experience. The foundation for your faith is not whether you have felt what other people have felt, whether your heart raced and the hair on the back of your neck stood up. The God who does the utterly unexpected is not asking you: Have you seen an angel, or have you heard the audible voice of God?

If you are looking for God's unexpected intrusion into the world, you need to look no further than at Jesus. God entered human history in the person of Jesus. In order to deal with all the causes, and all the results of our broken relationship with him and our broken relationships with other people, by Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross, he rescues us from the life we have lived. And by his resurrection, Jesus proved who he was – God come in the flesh, and he shows us the future. Our future is that we are going to have a body like his body. And we are going to live in a world that is fully renewed and restored to full joy, justice and peace.

Between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming, we now live by faith in him. When you trust in Jesus and do not rely on your own religious activity, or how many spiritual experiences you have had, or have not had, when you simply trust in Jesus and don't rely on the feelings or mystical experiences that you've had, God restores our relationship with himself. His kingdom power comes to work within us and through us. He gives us a new identity. He frees us from the traps of mysticism, irreligion and religion. We are set free to accept people we used to judge and reject. We are set free to forgive people who have hurt us. We're set free from the bondage to things that have controlled us.

Good news! You can have a totally new foundation for your life – a relationship with Jesus Christ that comes to you by faith.

Now, I have run through a number of things that keep people frozen in their perceptions, unable to receive the unexpected activity of God. But you know the main thing that keeps us stuck? It is not our prior religious training, negative experiences at church. It is private interest. See, the bottom line for most of us is that we can't believe. We read books about the Christian faith. We talk with Christians who will tell us that they have entered a relationship with the Risen Christ. We can hear stories. We can listen to sermons in church and we can still say: Not enough evidence. I still can't believe.

The issue, if you will permit me, is really not that you can't believe. The issue is, for so many people, that you don't want to believe. See, to believe means that some private interest of ours must be put to death. Many of you know that if you open your life up to Jesus, he is going to start messing around with your life. He is going to start messing around with your job, with your relationships, with your money, with your sex life, with your future. And you don't want God messing around in your life.

I once talked with a scientist about entering a relationship with Christ. As he began to think through the implications of being a Christian, he said to me: "If I become a Christian that means I can't have sex with my girlfriend any more."

I said: "That is correct. Sex will have to wait until you are married."

He grabbed his head and began shaking it violently. He said: "Well, that means I can't look at pornography anymore."

I said: "That's right."

Again, he grabbed his head and began shaking it. As a scientist, he ran through all of the implications he could think of about how Jesus was going to mess around in his life. After he went down the list of implications, he said: "OK, Rich, I'm ready."

That scientist understood that the issue was not the evidence of whether God has, indeed, stepped into the world in the person of Christ. He has. It is not can you believe? It is asking will you really orient your life around Jesus Christ? My friend, the scientist, knew that the thing that was keeping him from true faith was a private interest. He realized: If I open my hands to the Lord, I will have to let go of the one thing that is filling my hands.

And that is true for you, friends, today. Well, let's read on in the story. Verses 17-25:

Luke 24:17-25

He asked them, "What are you discussing together as you walk along?" They stood still, their faces downcast. One of them, named Cleopas,

asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place. In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels, who said he was alive. Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see." He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"

I want you to see in this story how far people can go down the road of religion and still not have faith in the God who does the utterly unexpected. There are so many things that we employ as surrogates, as substitutes for real faith. We deceive ourselves into thinking that everything is alright between us and God. But Jesus, I believe, would say to many of us what he said to these two on the road to Emmaus in verse 25:

Luke 24:25

He said to them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!"

Look at these two, because they are a model for us of what is not faith in the unexpected. Religious talk is not faith. They are walking along the road talking to Jesus, carrying on a spiritual discussion.

So many people enjoy religious discussions. They like to get into religious conversations. They like to debate and discuss various views of God. They talk about the church service and how good the choir was, and their thoughts about the sermon. Some people get around Christians and because they can talk the talk and discuss issues from the bible, and they pray a little prayer before their meals, and they think they have real faith.

Religious talk is not real faith. A knowledge of the facts is not faith. Verses 18-20:

Luke 24:18-20

One of them, named Cleopas, asked him, "Are you only a visitor to Jerusalem and do not know the things that have happened there in these days?" "What things?" he asked. "About Jesus of Nazareth," they replied. "He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him

I had a religion professor in college who could explain to you the facts of Christianity as clearly as any preacher. He knew the Bible cold – ice cold. But he was not a Christian. My wife, Marlene, was raised as a Presbyterian. She went to church every week. She thought her whole life that being a Christian was simply getting the correct answers on God's true/false test.

- True or False – Jesus was born of a virgin. She marked “true.”
- True or False – Jesus died on a cross for our sins. She marked “true.”
- True or False – Jesus rose from the dead. She marked “true.”

She thought being a Christian was simply getting 100% on God's true/false test. She discovered that becoming a Christian was not answering a true/false test correctly. It was answering a yes/no test.

- Yes or No – Will you reorient your entire life around Jesus Christ?
- Yes or No – Will you make Jesus the central guiding person in your life?
- Yes or No – Will you submit your life to Jesus as your Lord and will you receive him as your Savior?

You can know the facts of Christianity cold but until you have said “yes” to Jesus and have committed yourself, reoriented your life around Jesus, having him at the very center of your life, submitting to him as your Lord and Savior, you are not yet a Christian.

Knowing the facts is not putting your faith into the God who does the utterly unexpected. Calling Jesus a prophet is less than Christian faith. Verse 19:

Luke 24:19

“What things?” he asked. “About Jesus of Nazareth,” they replied. “He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people.

Some people believe that Jesus was a wonderful prophet. They write these books about the most influential men of all time and Jesus winds up in the top two or three. There are all these sports debates about who is the greatest pitcher of all time. We treat Jesus like the answer to these debates. We put Jesus in our Hall of Fame of Human Heroes. Calling Jesus a great prophet, a great teacher, or a great religious leader is not sufficient to make up Christian faith.

See, friends, there is a great gulf, a great chasm between us and God. As people we stand on one side of the gulf and Almighty God stands on the other side. And if all you see of Jesus is man's longest reach upward toward God, the best and highest that humanity has to offer, if all you see in Jesus is man standing on his tippy toes stretching himself up to God, you have not yet arrived at Christian faith. You need to see in Jesus a person standing on the other side

of the chasm. You need to see in Jesus the hand of God reaching down to you and me. Jesus is not just simply the longest reach of the human arm to God. He is the reach of the hand of God to us.

And past faith is also not true Christian faith. Verses 20-21:

Luke 24:20

The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

If you have a Bible, you can underline these words “had hoped” in verse 21. The tense of that verb in the original language is referring to an action that began in the past and ended in the past. We used to hope, but we stopped hoping. We used to believe, but at some time in the past, we stopped believing.

How many people think that because they used to believe as children, they used to pray, they used to go to church, they used to be a religious person, that they are Christians. Perhaps you went to church camp as a child, or you went to Christian Bible School, or you spent years in parochial school, or you used to never miss Sunday School. Past faith is not Christian faith.

The Bible always asks one question: Where are you at with Jesus Christ today? Let me retranslate that: Is your life oriented around Christ today? Where is Christ in your life today? Is Christ in first place in your life today? Would someone looking at your life over the last six months conclude that there is nothing or no one more important to you than Jesus?

Today, friend, are you willing to trust Christ to be the one who can do the utterly unexpected for you? Don't talk about what you used to do and what you used to believe, what you did as a child, or what you did ten years ago. Is Christ the one you are pinning your hopes on today as the only one who can ultimately meet your needs? If your faith is not a today faith, then it falls short of a true Christian faith.

I talked about things that block us from coming to faith. I've talked about things that fall short of a true Christian faith. What is it that brings us to true faith? What can unlock closed hearts? Here is what we read in verses 25-27:

Luke 24:25-27

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

And note the two things that Jesus says. First of all, did not Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory? From the scriptures, Jesus points out first of all the necessity of Messiah hanging on a cross, suffering. It was necessary.

Why was it necessary for Messiah to suffer? The Bible gives us many answers, but among them are these: without suffering Christ could never have been our High Priest, the one who truly understands and can sympathize with people in their pain. Nothing is more helpful when we are going through something difficult than to have someone who has been there, someone who understands. I have seen the instant bonding that takes place between parents who have lost a child, or people who are cancer survivors. Jesus suffered as we do. He walked in our shoes. He understands and therefore, he can pray effectively for us. Do you know what the Bible says that Jesus, in part, is doing right now? What Jesus' ministry right now consists of in part? The Bible calls him a Priest right now. He is in heaven praying for his followers on earth. To pray effectively for someone, you need to understand them and understand their needs. To enter their situation with them, to sympathize with them so that their burdens become your burdens. Jesus is praying for many suffering people. To be an effective prayer and Priest, he had to suffer.

He had to suffer to show us that God loves us. You know, I could never believe in a God who didn't suffer. I don't know about you, but the great problem for me has always been the problem of suffering and the problem of evil in this world. There is so much pain. I could never follow a God who kept himself aloof from the pain of this planet. Who closed his eyes to it. Who pretended it wasn't real or important. I couldn't believe in a God who doesn't shed a tear. In Jesus Christ, God came and takes on all of that suffering in his own person. Unlike the gods of all the other religions, the Christian God personally experiences our misery and steps into this world – a world of genocides and cancer, a world in which innocent kids in Minnesota get gunned down in their schools, and the incapacitated are starved to death, a world in which a little girl is pulled from her bed in Florida, raped and killed. Christ takes on all that suffering in his own person.

Christians never need to be ashamed of God's response to pain and suffering because our God, uniquely, has had nails driven through his hand. Our God was spit at. He was murdered. Our God knows what it was like to lose a loved one. Our God knows and understand rejection and misunderstanding, hunger, thirst. He knows what it feels like to be a paraplegic and have your hands fixed in place and not be able to move or help yourself. He understands what it feels like to go through a slowly agonizing death.

It was necessary for Christ to suffer to communicate to us God's profound love for us and his identification with us. It was necessary for Christ to suffer to be our substitute. God issued a command way back in the Old Testament that basically

communicated the truth that those who sin must die. Sin is to be paid for according to the moral law of the universe by death. God sent Jesus into the world to be our substitute, to take on himself the sins of the world and to pay the penalty that had been ordained for us from eternity, namely, death. Christ could not be a substitute without suffering and dying.

You know our own suffering often opens us up to the unexpected activity of God. There is a reality in this spiritual life that only when we come to the end of our own rope will we reach out for a lifeline from God. Some of you have a lot more rope than other people. You've come to the end of your rope on a number of occasions. You've hit bottom and as they say in AA sometimes when you hit bottom, you have to stop digging. But our own suffering can cause us to look in a fresh way towards Christ.

Friend, maybe you are in crisis today. Maybe you find yourself attached to something or someone who is destroying you. Going back to that same old person, or the same old habit, for meaning in your life is only going to bring you further pain. Today you need to turn to Christ. Repeating the same old habits is only going to bring you the same old hurt and pain.

Some of you are in crisis because you are going through a relational breakup. Maybe you are going through a separation or divorce, or you've lost your boyfriend or girlfriend, or your engagement has ended. Why not turn to a relationship today that will never fail you? A relationship with God through Jesus Christ. The love you have been looking for in life, why not look for it in Christ? Sometimes our own suffering and pain can open us up to the God who does the unexpected.

Note what else causes us to believe in the God who does the utterly unexpected. Verse 27 and 32:

Luke 24:27

And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.

Luke 24:32

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Friends, I will tell you there is nothing more encouraging than to begin to understand that the entire Bible is basically about Jesus. This book is a Jesus centered book. If you want to understand and interpret this book correctly, you will look for Jesus on every page. Jesus opens the Bible to these men and thereby opens their faith by explaining to them from Moses and the prophets that is from the whole Old Testament the things concerning himself. So many people read the Bible as a set of abstract truths, a bunch of moral principles

disconnected from one another, a bunch of stories about battles, armies and killings. The temple, sacrifices and religious practices and bunches of bunches of data. The central thread running through the whole Bible is Jesus. It is all meant to point to Jesus.

You can start at the beginning of Genesis. Jesus is the last Adam. The representative man whose decisions affect the human race, much as the first Adam's decisions affected the human race. Jesus is the one who in Genesis 3 will bruise the head of the serpent. Jesus is the true seed of Abraham. Jesus is the sacrificed son, much like Abraham offered his son Isaac up to God. Jesus is the true son offered up to God, but instead of the father restraining Abraham's hand as he was about to plunge his knife into Isaac's chest, regarding Jesus he didn't restrain the executioner's hand. The Father plunged the knife into his own Son's chest. Jesus is the prophet like Moses. He is the ark that carries us to salvation like Noah's Ark. He fulfilled all of the prophecies.

Oh, if I had the time to show you in Daniel 9 the very day that Jesus was crucified was predicted 600 years before his death. The very day he was crucified, down to the day, to the Good Friday, was predicted 600 years before his death.

And of course, in that most famous prophecy, Isaiah 53, the Bible says 700 years before Jesus: "He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. The punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed. We are all like sheep have gone astray. Each one of us have turned to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Let me share with you a personal note. I grew up in a Jewish family. I could never believe in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, if I couldn't find evidence for this in the Old Testament, what Jews call the Jewish Bible. All through the Jewish Bible is this incredibly consistent message of a suffering and dying Messiah for our sins. Jesus is on every page. That is part of the reason I believe.

Let me ask you a question: Have you found Jesus in the Bible? Have you read enough scriptures or heard enough scripture that you do trust that God has done something utterly unexpected in Christ? Do you know and do you understand what the disciples are talking about in verse 32 when they say:

Luke 24:32

They asked each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?"

Has that happened to you, friend? Have you discovered Jesus in the pages of the scriptures? Has your heart ever been set on fire by the Holy Spirit revealing Jesus to you?

But it is not enough to find Jesus in suffering or in the Bible. We must, by faith, grab a hold of Christ and not let him go. I particularly like what it says in verses 28-29.

Luke 24:28-29

As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther. But they urged him strongly, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening; the day is almost over." So he went in to stay with them.

You know, Jesus taught us a very important spiritual lesson regarding faith. It is not a given that you are able to find Christ or have Christ be with you or feel the presence of God in your life. It is not a given. No matter what we do or how we relate, it is all up to God. Jesus was going to walk on by, until these men pleaded with him, "No, stay with us." If you say today: I need Christ in my life – God requires you to risk, to call out for him, to invite him to be with you. To make no response is to respond. To make no decision is to decide against. Jesus said, "He who is not for me is against me." To not ask Christ today: Come and be with me, live inside of me is to say "You can just walk away Jesus" and he will keep on going.

You have to decide. You have to ask.

God did the utterly unexpected and raised Jesus from the dead. All the disciples prior training and prior expectations inclined them to not perceive the truth that was staring them in the faith. The reality of the empty tomb and their encounter with Jesus Christ shattered their prior expectations.

God continues to do the utterly unexpected today. He healed my friend, Mike, of severe epilepsy he suffered with for 20 years. This past month he healed a woman in our congregation named Jean of cancer that had been in her body for eight years. And God wants you to believe him for the utterly unexpected in your life this Easter. He wants you to believe that he can do the utterly unexpected in your family's life, in your spouse's life, in your children's lives, in your parent's lives, in the lives of loved ones and friends around you. Easter is the shattering of our prior preconceptions. Easter sweeps away the limits on what you believe God can and will do.

What can God do for you? What can you ask God for this Easter? Let's pray.

When God Does The Utterly Unexpected

Rich Nathan
March 26-27, 2005
Easter Weekend
Luke 24:13-35

I. Failing to Perceive the Unexpected (Luke 24:13-16)

II. Why We Don't Perceive the Unexpected

A. Prior Religious Training

1. Irreligious Non-Christians
2. Religious Non-Christians
3. Mystical Non-Christians

B. Private Interest

III. What Is Not Faith in the Unexpected (Luke 24:17-25)

- A. Religious Talk (Luke 24:17)
- B. Knowledge of the Facts (Luke 24:18)
- C. Calling Jesus a Prophet (Luke 24:19)
- D. Past Faith (Luke 24:20-21)

IV. What Causes Us to Believe in the Unexpected (Luke 24:25, 32)

- A. Suffering (Luke 24:26)
- B. The Scriptures (Luke 24:27, 32)
- C. Desiring Christ (Luke 24:28-29)