

Grace to you this morning and peace, from God the Creator and from Jesus, who on this day is the Lord of Life. Amen.

One of the reasons that I love reading scripture is that it constantly surprises me. I call it the “Wow Factor.” The Wow Factor in Scripture occurs whenever I come across a passage that contradicts either popular opinion, and/or my own assumptions.

Let me give you a few examples. According to Numbers 23, “God is not a human being that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.” Once again: “God is not a human being that he should lie, or a mortal, that he should change his mind.” And yet, according to the book of Exodus, as well as the book of Jonah in the Old Testament, God *does*, in fact, change God’s mind!

You know this moment in the story of Jonah, right? God tells the prophet Jonah to warn the Ninevites – so, these are people who live in Nineveh, which was the capital of Syria, and Syria has as its equivalent today, ISIS; they were notorious, they were infamous, and instead of simply keeping prisoners or releasing them, they would often decapitate those they held captive. Nineveh accordingly, is a symbol of evil in the ancient world; the city that is fundamentally opposed to God.

So God tells the prophet to warn Nineveh, of all people, that if they don’t change their ways and repent, if they don’t turn away from sin, God will destroy their city and everything in it. You know what happens next, right? Nineveh surprisingly repents, making Jonah appear to be the most successful missionary of all time (I wish I had that power). Even more surprisingly, their repentance and conversion from sin causes God to *repent*, to feel sorry for the evil God intended to inflict upon them. We see this translation in the King James Version; it says, not simply that God relented from punishing, or even, as our translation reads, that God changed God’s mind, but that God, from the heart, *repents* for what God was about to do. A God who repents?! I find that fascinating, don’t you?

...If not, consider Joshua 10. There we learn that Joshua, appealing to God, “stops the sun in the sky during battle.” The text says, “On the day when the Lord gave the Amorites over to the Israelites, (of whom Joshua was the leader), Joshua spoke to the Lord. And he said, in the sight of Israel, “Sun, stand still at Gideon, and moon, in the valley of Iserlohn. And the sun stood still, until the nation took vengeance on their enemies.”

You hear that? *The sun stood still*. What does that tell you? It tells you that the Hebrews lived in a world that they understood to be one where the sun rotates around, or travels around, the Earth. They lived, in other words, in a geocentric, or earth-centered, universe. They believed the sun travelled around the earth, and not vice versa. This explains why the Catholic Church, our own Martin Luther, and John Calvin all condemned Copernicus for proposing the opposite in terms of cosmology. Copernicus,

you may recall, proposes the heliocentric, or sun-centered, universe, which, of course, ultimately replaced the view of a geocentric universe we find here in Joshua 10. Why did Martin Luther, the Catholic Church, and John Calvin do such a thing? Because the Bible told them to. I find that stunning, don't you? Perhaps you recall here the words of Galileo, after being condemned. He says, "The Bible teaches us not how the heavens go, but how to go to heaven." I love that.

... Now, if that doesn't interest you, consider the sin of Sodom. Popular opinion identifies the sin of Sodom as gang rape or sexual violence. Ezekiel 16, however, dictates otherwise. It says, "This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and the needy." That's pretty far from sexual violence! The sin of Sodom here: pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, as well as not aiding the poor and the needy.

In each of these examples, we potentially have what I call "the Wow Factor." The Wow Factor occurs when you find yourself surprised by what the Bible actually says, in contrast to popular opinion, and/or your own assumptions. Wow.

Now it's one thing to identify what surprises *me* in the Bible, I've given you three examples; it's another to experience the Wow Factor for yourselves. So for today's message, I'm going to ask you to help me out.

I'm going to share five things in First Corinthians 15 – our Second Reading for the day, one I invite you to follow along with – five things in First Corinthians 15, that I find surprising. After I've named them, I'm going to invite you to determine which was the most surprising, which was the most intriguing to you. Which one, in other words, really made you think, wow, in response? Your answer will be one I guarantee you will remember for at least the coming week, until, of course, you come back next Sunday, or our second Easter service.

So, let's start with a little context. Paul wrote our Second Reading for today in response to what the Corinthians believed concerning life after death. As Greeks, and this goes back to the Greek philosopher Plato, they viewed their souls as separable from their bodies, much like we do today.

So for example, when I preside at funerals, I often hear people in eulogies talk about how John or Jim or Mark or Sarah or Ben, any of these names, how they're "up in heaven doing what they want to do," right? So, at a funeral I attended somewhat recently, the gentleman was up in heaven, hunting and fishing, (which would be about the eighth circle of hell for me.) But as you can see, there, that kind of thinking presupposes this mind, spirit or the spirit/body dualism that we find in Greek philosophy. Our bodies as it were, house the soul, and after death, God performs what you might call a "soulectomy" or a soul-removing operation, extracting that ghostly essence out of our feeble and failing bodies.

Unfortunately, if our souls already possess immortality, as the Greeks believed, then the resurrection of Jesus, that is his victory over sin and death, *means nothing*. It's superfluous and unnecessary. In other words, if your soul is already immortal, Jesus

did nothing in terms of his victory over death, to release it from the bondage of decay. This is why Paul spends an entire chapter on the resurrection in his first letter to the Corinthians.

Now, when it comes to “Wow Factors,” I count at least five in First Corinthians 15:1-11. The first one appears in verse 2, if you wish to follow along. There Paul speaks about the good news he proclaimed, through which the Corinthians are being saved.

Being saved. The same phrase appears in Acts 2, at the beginning of Pentecost. “And day by day the Lord added to their number those who *were being saved.*” Salvation, we discover, is not based on a single decision we make to invite Jesus into our lives. It’s a decision, rather, that *God* makes in committing Godself to us. In short, it’s a *process*, as evident in the phrase “being saved.” The Bible teaches that salvation, or “being made whole,” takes time.

One example of this is the character of Nicodemus in the Gospel of John. Nicodemus doesn’t immediately convert; it takes him 20 chapters to see the light. Salvation, accordingly, is a process, much like healing in general. If someone ever presses you to answer the question, “Are you saved?” – and I love getting that question, especially from strangers – remember the words here of Scripture. It’s not that you are saved, it’s that you *are being saved*. Salvation and healing is a lifelong process. And it’s because of *God’s* commitment to *you*, not because of your commitment to God. Now, I find this observation not only refreshing, but surprising, don’t you?

...If not, our second Wow Factor appears in verses 3–4. There Paul says he “handed on to the Corinthians what he had received, that Christ died for your sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.” In these verses, Paul shares with the Corinthians what may be the *oldest Christian belief in the form of a creed we have in the entire New Testament.*

Now I find this fascinating, a glimpse regarding what the earliest Christians believed, long before the Apostles or the Nicene Creed; something Paul receives, and hands on to the Corinthian church.

We see something similar in the second chapter of Philippians, where Paul cites an early Christian hymn to affirm the core belief of the first-generation church. We see it as well at the beginning of the Gospel of John, where John says, “In the beginning was the Word.” Many scholars believe that, too, was a hymn. All of these are portals, or gateways, into what the earliest Christians believed and observed. That’s fascinating.

...But if not, our third Wow Factor appears in verse 4. Here we focus on the content of the creed that Paul cites, which says, not that Jesus was entombed, (the Greek word for that is *mnemeion*), but that he was buried (the Greek word for which is *taphos*), and that He appeared, (the Greek word of which is _____, where we get the word ophthalmologist – it means to have a vision), where he appeared to his various followers.

This raises a fascinating question: Was Jesus buried in an unmarked grave, rather than placed in an empty tomb, as the Gospels would say several decades after Paul's letters? And what did his followers experience, insofar as he "appeared" to them? Well, as most scholars will tell you, the language of "appearance" suggests they had *visions* of the risen Christ, something the Book of Acts confirms three times with regard to the experience of the Apostle Paul.

You remember. A blinding light, and then Jesus appearing, saying, "Why have you persecuted me?" Talk about a Wow Factor! Maybe our understanding of the resurrection is *totally* off. Maybe, Jesus's resurrection was not the resuscitation of his corpse, or a preview of the series *The Walking Dead*, but rather something much more mysterious, something perhaps *between* two worlds – our world, and the world to come. I find that fascinating.

... But if you don't, our fourth Wow Factor appears in verses 5–8. And I predict this one will fascinate at least half of you. There Paul lists the various people to whom Jesus appeared. Can you tell me who they are? Peter, or Simon; the 12 disciples; then 500 brothers and sisters at once; then to James, the brother of the Lord (now I'd be upset, if I was the Lord's brother, I would expect he'd appear to me first, but he appeared to Peter first!) And then finally, "the apostles," (which makes me wonder how these apostles are different from the 12 disciples), and then Paul himself, as one, he says, "untimely born" ...

Do you notice who's missing in Paul's list? I'll give you a hint. To whom does Jesus first appear, according to John 20, our gospel reading for today? Mary Magdalene! So now, you see who's missing in Paul's list, which makes verses 5–8 especially fascinating. *Why were these women excluded* from the tradition Paul received? Did the tradition itself affirm that men experienced the resurrection first? Or was it the case that Paul *suppressed* these names in order to avoid raising the stature of women in the Christian church? Yikes! Why does the list Paul received exclude women entirely? That's a question I will leave to you. But either way, wow.

... Our fifth and final Wow Factor appears in verse 10. There Paul writes, "But by the grace of God, I am what I am. And his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Again, "not I, but the grace of God that is with me." Paul's apparent vanity aside, what fascinates me about this verse is how absolutely undeserving God's grace toward us is, right? I mean, consider Paul himself: By his own admission, in verse 9, he "persecuted the church of God," which leads experts to think that he potentially witnessed various martyrdoms of the earliest Christians – and yet, God chose him, God accepted him, God claimed him, God embraced him, and God empowered him. That's what makes grace, that is, God's reckless, abundant, unconditional love, so amazing, as the song says.

"Our love," according to the theologian, Carl Barth, "is only made possible by God's love. We love because he loved us first." That's a quotation of 1 John 4. When we

baptize infants in the Lutheran tradition, it's our way of confirming that *God* initiates the relationship, not us; that they are already loved. And that the proper attitude to cultivate is one of gratitude and response, because they are already loved.

Our responsibility, in turn, becomes one of teaching, encouraging young people in ways they can love and serve others *in response to* God's absolutely surprising, undeserving, reckless grace.

So there you have it. Five things in our Second Reading for today I find surprising, if not fascinating.

But what about you? Which of these surprised, intrigued or wowed you the most?

Was it Paul's talk of being saved? If so, raise your hand. (Okay, a couple of takers, about four or five...)

Was it, secondly, our discovery of the earliest Christian creed, embedded in verses 3-4? If so, raise your hand. (Okay, I got one; right. That's fantastic! We didn't even have *that* at the first service; nobody found that interesting. I'm a total dork; that's why I do this kind of stuff. But I'm glad to have someone join me as surprised by that.)

Was it thirdly, the possibility that Jesus was buried rather than entombed, something we affirm in the Apostles Creed, and that he appeared in visions to his earliest followers? If so, raise your hand. (I find that fascinating, too. In fact, in graduate school, I wrote a brilliant paper called "From Grave to Cave" that never got published – but I did pass the class!)

Or, was it, fourthly, that the creed Paul cites never mentioned the experience of women like Mary Magdalene of the risen Christ? If so, raise your hand. (I figured that'd be a big one. That's at least half of you. I share your fascination by that as well. And it makes me wonder, and want to learn more about, why this might have been.)

Or was it, finally, the absolutely amazing grace Paul experienced as the one God found, chose, accepted and empowered, that freed Paul from his past – the kind of God we proclaim every Sunday here at Queen Anne Lutheran Church, the one that inspires, hopefully, profound gratitude for what we have been given freely by God: namely, life itself, and love. If *that* surprised *you*, please raise your hand. (Okay, you're the real Lutherans in the congregation! "Surprised by grace," very good!)

Now, here's the best part. The Wow Factor you chose will be one you can contemplate, and I predict, one you will remember this whole week. Why? Because we recall what interests us most. My hope is that one of these interested you – but if not, you'll just have to come back next Sunday; I have many, many more.

In Jesus' name,
Amen.