



UNEXPECTED

AN EASTER DEVOTIONAL



UNEXPECTED

If you could sum up Jesus's life, death and ministry into one word, "unexpected" would be a pretty great choice.

Jesus didn't do anything the way people expected him to. His birth and arrival was not what Israel was expecting—they expected a mighty king to be born into a castle, not a baby laying in a feeding trough of a stable. His ministry was not what people expected either—people thought he was going to overthrow the corrupt Roman government and bring justice and peace to the world. Instead he came to overthrow the hold of sin in our hearts and bring restoration to our relationship with God.

Jesus delights in using the unexpected. And that's still true today. In the midst of an unexpected year, God is still moving and working. Perhaps now is the perfect time to release some of our expectations and allow God to work in his unexpected ways.

Our hope is that you use this devotional as a time of reflection in the weeks leading up to Easter. For many, Lent (the 40 days leading up to Easter) is a time of reflection, fasting and identifying with Christ. We have designed this devotional to follow that same timeframe and take you through the six weeks leading up to Easter. Each week provides a daily devotional on weekdays and a written prayer for the weekends. We suggest beginning on Monday, February 22nd, but you are welcome to use this however suits your needs best.

Join us on this journey to Easter, because our amazing Savior is STILL in the business of doing "unexpected" things in our lives today.



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UNEXPECTED SAVIOR

The expectations that the Israelites had of the coming Messiah would stand in stark contrast to the arrival and life of Jesus the Christ. From His conception, His birth in a stable, the commonness of His family to His disgraceful death on the cross, there was nothing about His life that made one think of royalty. There was nothing that made Him stand out as one who would overthrow the Romans and restore Israel to its rightful place. He looked nothing like a King or Warrior, yet He fulfilled every prophecy ever written about the Messiah. He was certainly not what they were expecting in a savior, but he was exactly what they needed.

PRAYER FOR THE WEEKEND

Lord, So often I have expectations of who you are and how you should act. Often this can mean that I miss the truth of what you are doing in and around me because my expectations are incorrect. Please help me not to miss you or your ever-present help in my life because I am looking for a different kind of savior.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

TRUTH IN ADVERTISING

by Pastor Phil

Verse — Matthew 20:25-28

This Christmas I was on a search for a specific toy for our grandson, Jaxon — a white Ford F150 toy truck that modelled his daddy's truck. He loves to ride with daddy to Starbucks for an early morning Saturday donut, and the truck is the mode of transport. He loves daddy's truck--so I searched and searched and found one that was really close. I ordered it, probably paid a little too much for it. And then it arrived. I'm sure it disclosed the size of that thing, but let me tell you, it didn't exactly match what I thought I was getting.

It can be frustrating to be looking for one thing only to find another. Jesus was UNEXPECTED to just about everybody. While people expected a Savior, they didn't expect this Savior. A ruler? Yes. A break in the norm? Of course. But not a Sacrifice. Not a servant. But that's exactly how God determined to rescue the world. His answer was not to give what people wanted but what people needed. Jesus provided what they didn't even realize they needed. They needed forgiveness at the deepest level. Humanity needed rescuing from spiritual bondage, not physical bondage, at the deepest level.

He gave an UNEXPECTED call to Servanthood.

He gave an UNEXPECTED definition of Leadership & Greatness.

He gave an UNEXPECTED call to Purpose.

That's often how Jesus works in our lives. He often doesn't do what we want or expect. He does what is necessary & needed. One more thing-- God wasn't dishonest in His Old Testament description of the Messiah. People simply saw only the parts they wanted. So what is it today that the Holy Spirit would be leading you to ask? Lord, what is it you want me to understand and learn from this challenge?

It might be UNEXPECTED, but I promise it will be powerful.

Lord, I apologize that I have so often put you in a box to fit my desires and will rather than giving you free reign. I invite you today to reveal in me what you want to do in my life. I give you permission to do the UNEXPECTED to bring about my best and your Glory. In Jesus Name, Amen.

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

by Pastor Brian

WEEK 1 DAY 2

Verse — Matthew 16:21

It seems when each Easter season approaches the Lord blesses me with small nuggets of truth from the Word that are an inspiration to me. This verse in Matthew reminds me that the Lord God will show up in response to my faith and prayers and save me in ways that I may not expect. I should be ready and even anticipate this to happen. His response is coming for me and for you. Hallelujah!

Most of us have been around the Word of God long enough to know that the believers in the time of Jesus were believing in Faith that the expected Messiah would come and free them from the tyranny of Roman rule. Moreover, they expected this to be a violent takeover from the top down. Well, this verse in Matthew 16 and others around it were not what his believers were expecting to hear. They were expecting something to occur through the Messiah, but they were not expecting their Master to suffer, die and then resurrect from the dead. They certainly were not praying this way either, were they? They wanted the Lord to act on their prayers as spoken. But the Lord's plans were the best for them.

All throughout the bible, we read stories of how God used the faith of believers to provide for the people, but the answer turned out to be an unexpected one. Read the stories of Moses in Exodus 14, Daniel in the lions' den and Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the book of Daniel just to name a few common accounts where this occurred.

This verse in Matthew reminds me, and all of us today, that we have a Savior who will show up in response to our prayers this year. But let's go one step further and not be surprised with the unexpected answer from the Lord to carry us through this year together.

Lord Jesus, My prayer today is Ephesians 3:20 personalized: "Now to You who is able to do IMMEASURABLY more than all I ask or IMAGINE, according to Your power that is at work within me, to You be glory in my life forever and ever! Amen.

UNEXPECTED DRIVES by Pastor Katie

Verse — Hebrews 11 & Romans 4:18-21

When I first moved to Port Huron, I bet you didn't know that I wasn't happy about coming. Sure I was excited for the opportunity to learn more about what working in ministry is like, but I came angry. We were on our way home from one of the best vacations my family has ever gone on, and I was looking forward to coming to Colonial Woods and the experience, knowledge and new challenges this adventure would bring me. But as we got home the day before I was supposed to leave, we found out there was a HUGE snow storm coming, and my parents decided that I needed to head to Port Huron that day instead of the next. I wasn't happy about that decision at all! I didn't have a chance to say my goodbyes to my family and friends as I had planned to do the next day. I wasn't ready to go, but I got in my car and drove through a blizzard to get to where God was calling me to go. That was a big unexpected for me. I didn't know that the angry, sad 5 hour drive in a snowstorm to a place that I had never been before would lead me to where I am today.

Looking at the life of Abraham, he faced a lot of unexpected situations. God extended to him the same invitation he extends to us—to trust with all his heart—and Abraham said yes, even though he had no idea where his yes would lead. He willingly stepped into the unexpected. He didn't know where he was going, who he would meet, or the sacrifices it would take.

Hebrews 11:8 says, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he didn't not know where he was going.”

God knows where He is calling each of us. He knows the plans that He has for us. We just have to choose to say yes. We have to say yes to the unexpected. We have to say yes to the unknown and put our trust in Him! Are you open and willing to head into the unexpected?

LEADING BACKWARDS by Pastor Chelsea

Verse — John 13:1-17

Have you ever been in a situation where you discovered the disconnect between leading by giving direction and leading by example? Maybe you were the kid in a classroom and your teacher told you to clean up your desk, meanwhile their desk had mountains of clutter. Or maybe you have instructed your kids to spend less time on their phone, only to discover you also have spent hours on your device. It's hard to lead both in word and in example. We would rather yell out in exasperation to "do as I say, not as I do!"

Jesus not only led in example and in word, but he even took it a step further—he led upside down. Jesus always had this way of taking the norm and the expectation and turning things on their head. Brennan Manning, in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, refers to this as the "backwards economy" of Jesus, where the first shall be last and the leader shall become a servant. Picking up a towel and washing a room full of dirty disciples' feet is not your typical executive decision of the most important person in the room, in fact, it's just plain backwards and upside down.

No one would ever instinctively lead the way Jesus led, and that's what makes his call both so incredible and challenging.

Whether you realize it or not, you are a leader. Your influence may be large or small, but there is someone in your life looking up to you and your leadership. Are you leading through your words? Are you leading through your example? Are you leading as a servant?

Dear Jesus, Our goal on this journey towards Easter is to become more like you. Would you empower us to lead like you did? Speak through us words of encouragement and life. Make us mindful of our example and actions so they reflect and honor you. And help us lay down our pride to lift up others above ourselves. We can't do this without you. Amen..

SACKING THE EXPECTED

by Pastor Tim

Verse — Ephesians 2:10

This young man stood at a towering 5' 8" and weighed about 200 pounds. If you were to look at him, you would have thought that he was average. There was no physical feature that made him stand out. He looked like any typical twenty-something male. I know what you are thinking. I am not describing King David. This gentleman that I am referencing is not even a character in the Bible.

The stocky young man I am describing is the former running back for the Detroit Lions, Barry Sanders. (We are talking football.) Looking at him as he was drafted by the Detroit Lions out of Oklahoma State University in 1989, you would never have expected that he would go on to rush for over 15,000 yards in the National Football League. Barry is currently the fourth greatest running back of all time in league history. His talent has been unmatched, but you would have never guessed it by looking at him.

It is the old adage, "Don't judge a book by its cover." It is easy for us to say that for a story like Barry Sanders, but the difficulty arises when looking at our own lives. We tend to look at ourselves and wonder what God can actually do with us. We are just average looking Christians. That is where you are wrong.

As we read in Ephesians 2:10, we see that we are God's handiwork. The New Living Translation says we are God's masterpiece. You were designed by God for a specific and extraordinary purpose. There is nothing else in this world that God made the same as you. You may be no Barry Sanders, but you are you. Stop expecting normal and look to see the unexpected that God has in mind for you. For you are not just average, you are His masterpiece.

UNEXPECTED POWER

Jesus came to earth to live a life as an example for us to follow. One of the things He demonstrated to us was how to live and move with the power of the Holy Spirit. This humble Messiah moved with amazing power. He spoke the word, and bodies were healed. He called a name, and the dead came to life. He restored hearts and gave honor and dignity back to those who were lost. The natural elements of earth were His to command. He walked on water, controlled the weather and multiplied food. There was nothing that was beyond His ability to control. No wonder they said “We have never seen anything like this!” (Mark 2:12)

PRAYER FOR THE WEEKEND

Lord, May I never forget the power of your touch, the strength of your words or the life-giving tenderness of your grace. When the world around me seems to overwhelm, would you remind me of the power you have to control the world? Nothing is impossible with you!

In Jesus Name, Amen.

LIMITLESS GOD by Amy**Verse — Psalm 147:1-11**

Disney's 1992 animated version of *Aladdin* features one of the most humorously memorable characters--Genie. Genie introduces himself to Aladdin and describes his extraordinary ability to grant wishes. Later in the conversation, he makes the statement, "Phenomenal cosmic powers...Itty, bitty living space." Although Genie does possess amazing might, we discover that he can indeed be contained and is restricted in the kinds of wishes he is able to grant.

Because God is beyond our understanding, we look for ways to relate His power to something we know even if it's a fictional character. We can easily view God's power like that of a genie who is able to perform some amazing feats and grant certain wishes. Limited power fits into our understanding of the world. We witness powerful people whose influence and reach only extend so far. We observe natural phenomena, like earthquakes and tornadoes, displaying enormous strength but still are limited to a particular area. Trying to grasp the idea of a limitless God is extremely difficult for us.

In Chronicles 2:6, Solomon ponders the idea of building an earthly temple for an almighty God. He questions, "But who is able to build a temple for him, since the heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain him?" David describes the Lord's power in Psalm 147 as limitless and beyond our comprehension.

We see examples throughout scripture of our miracle-working God operating beyond human understanding. Because of our finite ability to reconcile human limitations with the limitless power of our Creator, we often put God into a confined place. We tell ourselves there are things He is unable to do, and we miss out on seeing His mighty hand move in our lives.

Let's step out in faith, accept that we will never comprehend God's limitless power, and embrace the words of the song our kids sing in Sunday School--"My God is so big, so strong, and so mighty, there's nothing my God cannot do!"

CAN GOD DO ANYTHING? NO!

by Pastor Bruce

Verse — Ephesians 1:18-19

“Can the all-powerful Christian God create a stone so heavy he cannot lift it?” Simply stated, if God cannot create a stone or cannot lift what He has created, He must not be all-powerful. Skeptical non-believers try to convince the Christian that there IS something that God cannot do. God’s unlimited power cannot be disproven by an illogical question. However, there are some things that God cannot do.

It is impossible for God to sin. James 1 states that God cannot be tempted by evil. God has determined moral absolutes, and He works within those boundaries. He cannot deviate from them. Our God IS almighty, but He is unable to violate His own nature.

Another thing God cannot do is change. Hallelujah, our God is the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8). It has been said that the only constant in our lives is change; Seasons change, people change, civilizations change, etc. So the ONLY sure source of power we have to put our trust in is the knowledge that God Himself does not change and He will always do what He says He will do. Praise the Lord that time does not affect God. He is still the same omnipotent God (another word for all powerful).

There is NO LIMIT to what God can do because He will NEVER deviate from the way He works. I appreciate the description of God John the Baptist in Revelation 19:6. John heard the thunderous angels proclaim from the heavens, “Hallelujah, the Lord our God, the Almighty, reigns.” I love the Hebrew name for God--EL SHADDAI. El meaning GOD and Shaddai meaning ALMIGHTY. Christian, BE ENCOURAGED. It doesn’t take God any more or less power to create the universe or a butterfly. God never sleeps nor slumbers. We can be reassured that He has everything under His control.

REAL POWER by Pastor Todd

Verse — Micah 5:2-5

When we think of power, what comes to mind? Maybe it is a person of great strength, high position, someone with significant influence or control over others. I would dare say that we often do not think of someone who is the son of a carpenter, born in a small village, without any influence or wealth.

In Micah 5:2-5, the prophet foretold that Messiah would come from the small and seemingly insignificant town of Bethlehem:

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel will come from you, one whose origins are from the distant past ... And he will stand to lead his flock with the LORD's strength, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. Then his people will live there undisturbed, for he will be highly honored around the world. And he will be the source of peace...

God allowed the prophet Micah to see a glimpse of what the coming Messiah would look like, what power he would possess. He would lead his people with strength that was not his own but from the Lord.

Jesus' power was a paradigm shift, a completely different way of demonstrating strength, influence, and leadership.

- He respected the downtrodden and poor. It is the purpose for which He came. (Luke 4:18-19)
- The sick were made well and the blind given sight. (Luke 7:21)
- Those in bondage to demonic powers were set free. (Luke 4:33-35)
- Jesus spent a great deal of time encouraging people towards love. (Luke 6:17-49)
- He liberated those who were bound by social injustice and prejudice (Mark 7:24-30; Luke 5:12-15; 7:36-50; 8:43-48; 10:38-42; 19:1-10)
- He loved deeply. (Matt 9:36; Mark 10:21; Luke 7:13)

Jesus' power was unexpected, unmatched, and demonstrated to all who would accept Him. His power, demonstrated through love, has the power to change and save.

WEAKNESS FOR THE SLAM DUNK!

by Lisa

Verse — 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Back in high school, one of my best buddies and I used to play 2-on-2 basketball with friends just for fun. I know. I'm 4'11". Basketball isn't really my game. However, my buddy was one of our school's star players. He and I had perfected a great team strategy and weren't afraid to use it. I was pretty good at stealing, passing, and making sure he got the ball for a great shot. I even became pretty good at the occasional 3-pointer. We surprised a number of opponents. They had no idea how well we could play.

How'd we do it? Lots of practice. We became familiar with shots, passes, possibilities. We were able to anticipate where the other teammate would be and what they might do. We had a rhythm. And, quite frankly, we used my "weakness" as a strength. My size made stealing, maneuvering, and passing unexpectedly different from what other players were used to; therefore giving us a great advantage. We used the 3-point shots near the end of each game, throwing in another element of surprise. Now, trust me, without lots of practice, there's no way I could do that today!

However, those fun memories remind me of the unexpected power we have through Jesus in our weakness. I often see weakness as a negative, something that gets in the way of making something else happen. Yet Jesus says that I can do all things through him who gives me strength and that his power is made perfect in weakness! Jesus is saying that my weakness makes the impossible actually POSSIBLE. When I stop relying on what I can do alone and allow him to work through me, his power is made complete. Nothing is impossible with God.

So, how do we do this? With lots of practice, faith, and trust. By practicing and believing in the power of prayer; trusting in the power of Jesus' name; stepping out in faith knowing he will be strong in our weakness. I want to work toward that natural rhythm with our Lord, allowing him to work through my inadequacies for his gain. We always have the advantage with God on our side. Let's be people who lean into our weakness and into his strength. Let's be people who are familiar with the great team strategy we have with Jesus and aren't afraid to use it.

CONTINUOUS WORSHIP by Pastor Ryan

Verse — 1 Corinthians 10:31

I remember spending hours at my grandmother's piano trying to figure out how it worked. I never had anyone teach me how to play the piano, but somehow my fingers found where they needed to go. I would play for days at a time trying to figure out how to convey what was in my heart through those keys. Soon I began writing my own songs. Songs about anything and everything. It was through writing songs that I learned very quickly what the priorities of my heart truly were. Sometimes I think it's easier for us to think we love God more than we actually do. It can be very easy to fall into the category that is discussed in James 1:22-25, "being hearers of the word only and not doers." I realized a lot of the songs that I was writing had nothing to do with honoring God. It is not that they were necessarily bad, but I certainly realized I was not looking to God to be the satisfaction of my heart. Revelation 22:9 reminds us that our task is to worship God. Not to worship angels nor idols. We are not to be apathetic or offer half-hearted acts of worship but to fully commit ourselves in awe and reverence and service to the Lord.

1 Corinthians 10:31 says, "in everything we do, to do it all to the glory of God!" So much changes when we start to live this way. This type of worship is inward and of the heart. When we worship this way, we commune with our heavenly father and find joy, peace, comfort, patience, healing and so much more. But more than anything, we experience the soul-satisfying act of lifting high the name of Jesus and magnifying His holiness. Only then will we begin to see our inward expression become the driving force of our outward worship. The songs we sing have new life. The words on the screen at church are no longer words with little meaning that we repeat out of habit. They become true expressions of our heart to the Father. Our willingness to sing along loudly with the secular songs of the day becomes deafened by our cries out to God with songs meant to bring Him honor and glory. In turn, the people in our lives are drawn to the gospel of Jesus because they see the life-changing power that His grace has in our lives.

This is the power of true worship. A good song can turn a bad day into a good day. But true worship can change lives for eternity.

UNEXPECTED MESSAGE

There are certain things that we kind of expect to hear in life. Things that make sense to us. Good people get rewarded; bad people get punished. When you speed and get caught you get a ticket. When you disobey your parents, there's going to be trouble. These are messages we understand, and we are often surprised when things don't go the way we expect. The Israelites had certain messages that they understood. They were summed up in the law that was given to them through Moses. And they certainly expected the Messiah to speak this same message when He arrived. Jesus did uphold the law, but He also had a way of confounding them because He always took it to the next level. He spoke of love and forgiveness to those who didn't deserve it. He had some pretty harsh things to say to those who thought they had it all together. He seemed to enjoy saying unexpected things that made people stop and think.

PRAYER FOR THE WEEKEND

Thank you, Lord, that Jesus came to preach a message of love and forgiveness. I know that you call me to live in such a way that others will hear your message of hope and love and understand your heart for them. Lord, please help me to be faithful to your message and to represent you well to the world around me.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

THE UPSIDE DOWN SERMON by Pastor Dan

Verse — Matthew 5:1-12

It was my first week in college. (FYI, I just had my 40th birthday which means that this was over 20 years ago.) I was sitting in one of my first college classes ever. I didn't really know what to expect, but I had this vision of the professor coming up to tell us how smart he was and how dumb we were. I figured we were going to get this big speech on how, by the end of this class, if we did everything he asked us to do, we would be one step closer to being as smart as he was. Instead what he said was so *UNEXPECTED* that I don't remember much else from that class. He said "As we begin today, I want you to know that you won't agree with everything in this class, and that is ok. Instead of looking to agree with me, I'd prefer you seek to understand. That is the principle I hope to teach you." As I look back now, for a philosophy class, that opening makes sense. But at the time it was so unexpected I didn't quite know what to think.

I wonder if the feeling I had in that first college class that I took over 20 years ago is the same feeling the people and disciples had as Jesus walked up on that mountainside, sat down and began to teach. I wonder if they were expecting some amazing, motivational speech to make them feel extra special about themselves. Instead they heard Jesus talk about how they needed to be a blessing to those around them and those who they rarely gave thought to.

My challenge for you today is to think about someone who could use an unexpected blessing of God's love. How can you fulfill that same call that Jesus gave to those people so long ago with that sermon on the mountainside?

Can I add an unexpected thought? Maybe the person God is calling you to bless is someone you don't necessarily know or usually don't get along with. Maybe it's someone who needs to see God's message of love through the last person they thought would show it.

I HAVE TO DO WHAT?! by Pastor Jayson

Verse — Mark 10:17-27

Everytime I hear the story of the rich young ruler, I think of someone who is doing everything in their power to find the loopholes in life. Every time they read a rule book, every time they are given instructions, every time they play a game, every time they are in any contest at all; they are trying to find a way to take advantage of the system. To the rich young ruler, life was about checking things off a list in order to make sure He did everything right so he could get his reward. But what he didn't take into account was that Jesus can see right through the surface and peer right into our heart's motive.

Quite often I think that is something that we Christians forget. We get so worried about appearing put together, holy, and righteous to those around us; that we forget that Jesus doesn't care about appearances at all- He cares about our hearts. For all of us Christians, God is looking to point a finger in our lives and say that we are more worried about something trivial in the realm of the eternal than eternity itself. That is the *UNEXPECTED MESSAGE* of the Gospel, that God is concerned with our hearts and not our checklists.

For the rich young ruler, it was his money and possessions. Jesus could ask anything of him and he would have been willing to give it up, except that. Unfortunately for him, that's exactly what Jesus asked because it was the thing in his heart keeping him from being sold out for Jesus.

So what is it in your heart? Is there something that you are holding onto that is keeping you from experiencing a life that is sold out for Christ? Do you go through the checklists to make sure that your Christianity looks good on the outside, but if Jesus pointed to something in your life, you would be "*deeply dismayed by these words*" and "*go away grieving*"?

"Then who can be saved?" Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God." (Mark 10:26b-27).

POWER OF SILENCE

by Pastor Ann

Verse — John 8:1-11

Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry, the religious leaders did everything they could to try and trick him or trap him into saying something that would discredit His influence in the lives of the people. Jesus knew what they were doing and would answer in ways that left them with no opportunity to accuse him of anything.

The story of the woman caught in adultery is a familiar one to many. A woman caught in an illicit rendezvous is dragged through the streets and thrown at the feet of Jesus. "Jesus what should we do with this woman?", they asked. Jesus could either follow the Jewish law which imposed capital punishment for the crime, or he could extend mercy and ignore the law. It's a lose-lose situation for Jesus...so He chooses to say nothing. He ignores their question and instead begins to write on the ground. Where they expected Him to give them an answer, He was quiet. They were ready for a fight, but they were given UNEXPECTED silence. They stood there watching him write in the sand, getting more and more uncomfortable as the silence went on.

I am amazed at how silence convicts a guilty conscience. When we are left in the quiet, we are forced to think about the situation we are in and consider our actions. These religious leaders were guilty of hatred, jealousy, anger, and pride; and they didn't mind destroying this woman's life if they thought they could use her against Jesus. While we don't know what Jesus was writing, we do know that the silent pause impacted the men enough that they left one by one without casting a single stone. This was not what they were expecting.

As this encounter ends, we find another UNEXPECTED message as Jesus waits on the ground next to the woman while the men leave. Jesus speaks to her "Has no one condemned you? Then neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." One group wanted a fight and received silence. One expected condemnation and was given a message of forgiveness and grace.

Where do you find yourself in this story? Is this a moment of silent conviction or of grace undeserved?

WHAT DOES THE CROSS MEAN?

by Intern Kody

Verse — John 3:16-21

Throughout my Christian life, I have always viewed the cross as hope. Although it was absolutely horrific, it gave us hope as humans. John 3:16 talks about that hope that we can have through what Jesus did.

Throughout history, including in today's world, people have had all sorts of views and interpretations of what the cross has meant to them. One common wrong view I think is when people say that there is not any difference between what Jesus did by dying on the cross and what other leaders of religions did. The BIG difference is that Jesus had victory over hell, death, and the grave because He rose again on the third day. I think this problem has caused Christians to not just think wrongly, but also live with a wrong perspective about the cross.

It is important that Christians understand what the cross means. This also means knowing how it should affect the way we live when we have the correct perspective about it. This perspective is when we know that Jesus took on the cross with all of OUR sin on Him. He did it for us in our place. If the message of the cross is not that important in your life or you have “heard it enough”, then you are not going to be walking in the light or experience all of what God has intended for you. If it is a big deal for you and your life, it should be reflected in your heart and attitudes in daily life. When we look at John 3:16-21, it helps us reflect on these simple yet important truths:

- All of humanity is sinful.
- All of humanity needs a savior.
- All of humanity has no hope without what Jesus did.
- All of humanity is going to spend eternity in one of two places, heaven or hell.

It is very important that we not allow these truths to be an UNEXPECTED message to those who have never heard or understood them.

I would like to leave you with that initial question one more time for you to think about. What does the cross mean to you?

SAY WHAT? by Pastor Phil

Verse — Matthew 5:17-20

*“For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.”
Matthew 5:17-20*

Ever do a double take? Maybe a speaker uses an UNEXPECTED word. Maybe a person wears an UNEXPECTED outfit. Maybe a designer uses an UNEXPECTED color or design or pattern. Unexpected things have a way of getting our attention. So when Jesus preaches to the masses, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the Kingdom of heaven.” I guarantee there were some double takes. Heads were thrown back faster than a bass on the line of a professional fisherman.

Pharisees and teachers of the law were the best of the best. They were the “Top Gun” pilots of the religiously good. So why would Jesus set such an unexpected and unreachable goal for the masses? Well that’s kind of the point--He was getting their attention to make a really important point. You could never reach the goal. Not on your own. Not without Christ. He’s teaching some powerful truths:

1. I want to lead you to living life at a level higher than you ever imagined.
2. I want to lead you to a deeper holiness than you achieve on your own.
3. I want to lead you to an absolute and utter dependence on God--day by day, moment by moment.

You see, grace never calls us to a level of holiness or a standard lower than the Old Testament or legalism does. He calls us to surrender and dependence, realizing that we need a savior who is able to do for us what we could never do for ourselves. It’s trust. It’s faith. It’s grace.

I wonder what it is in your life that you are trying to do on your own. Your spiritual walk? Your hope for heaven? The Lord always calls us to deeper living, to powerful living, to maximum living. So maybe when He says something that makes you do a double take, it’s His way of speaking personally and specifically to you.

UNEXPECTED GRACE

Payments are a part of life. When you hit adulthood, bills are just something that becomes part of your monthly ritual. Whether it's a car payment, house or rent payment, paying for groceries, purchasing insurance or feeding hungry teenagers; payments are a part of our everyday lives. It's something that is just expected. The phrase "Nothing in life is free" is ingrained into our heads. Yet, as God forgives all of our sins and sends his Son to die on a cross for OUR sins, we are supposed to accept that no payment on our side is necessary. How can this be? This "Grace" is hard to accept because we believe we are supposed to pay for things given to us. One definition of grace is "God's favor towards the unworthy". The more we try to understand it at times, the more confusing it is that God could love us so much and want nothing in return. That is grace...and that is unexpected!

PRAYER FOR THE WEEKEND

Lord, Thank you for loving me unconditionally. Thank you for meeting me right where I am. Lord, I am so sorry for all the times I mess up, and I truly ask you to forgive me of my sins. This week I hope to show grace to people the same way you have shown grace to me. I love you Lord!

In Jesus Name, Amen.

YOU CAN CASH THE CHECK

by Pastor Brian

Verse — Romans 5:20-21

“...Where sin increased, grace increased all the more.”

Unexpected grace reminds me of something that happened to me when I was in missionary aviation school, training to be a missionary pilot/mechanic. As you can imagine, getting the necessary training to acquire my multi-engine and commercial pilots' certificates certainly would have a high price tag. So at the conclusion of my training, my turn came up in line at the financial office of Moody Aviation. Investigating my account the financial administrator told me that not only did I not owe them any money but there was a balance owed to me on my account. As he handed me a check he said, “Do me a favor and don't cash this check right away. I just might find something else that still needs to be covered.” Well, I waited for several weeks for a bill to come in the mail. But it never came. So **I cashed the check**. What a blessing and wonderful feeling it was for me to leave my training completely debt-free. Then I thought of those who helped accomplish this. Moody Aviation gave me half-off tuition. My wife's grandparents paid for all my tools which was around \$2000 in 1985. I was ready and so excited to get on with serving the Lord because of the grace given to me!

In Romans 5:20 we all know that Jesus promises to **more than fully cover** our sin debt with His blood forever. We are now completely “out of sin debt” with the Lord. Are you excited about this? Thank you, Lord!

The challenge for us is two-fold. First that we would ask the Lord to help us live each day of our lives with a fresh sense that we just found out that not only do we not owe anything to our God for our sin but that our debt was already MORE than covered. There is even a positive grace balance for us, too. Secondly, let this fresh joy cause us to serve the Lord like we didn't deserve the grace Jesus gave us on the cross.

Lord, my prayer today is Romans 6:13 (personalized): “Let me offer every part of myself to you as an instrument of righteousness; because I am now living under GRACE and I am so thankful and excited about it.”

So people...Go ahead, cash the check, and live for Jesus.

RULES=US...GRACE=JESUS by Pastor Katie

Verse — Romans 3:21-31

I don't know about you, but I like rules. I am your typical first child. I try to be reliable, conscientious, and cautious. I can sometimes be bossy or controlling. But I love rules and structure. Rules are good. They help maintain order.

There was this game that my friends and I played in college. Every round of the game, someone made up a new rule. So you had to not only remember the point of the game but all of the different rules in order to help you win! Sometimes it was so challenging just trying to remember all of the different rules that I would lose focus of the task at hand and end up losing. Focusing too much on rules takes our focus away from where it really needs to be.

Rules are more about us. Grace is more about Jesus.

Read Romans 3:21-31. Verses 23-24 say, *“For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.”*

Rules are often gray, not black and white. They just tell you what to do or what not to do, but they can't actually help you accomplish whatever you are trying to accomplish. Rules point us toward ourselves. Grace is more about Jesus.

Grace is really hard for me to accept sometimes. Why? Because I don't deserve it. Grace is one of those things that we can't fully understand. We try to comprehend it in our humanness. We get out our algorithms and try to figure it out, but we can't. It's bigger than our minds can understand.

Grace wasn't free for Jesus. He paid the cost with His life. It cost Him everything. We don't deserve it, but He freely gives the gift of grace and salvation to anyone who calls upon His name.

WHO LIKES TO BE WEAK? by Pastor Chelsea

Verse — 2 Corinthians 12:9-10

But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

I like to do things my own way.

Perhaps you can relate. I like feeling strong, capable and in control. When I feel weak or unformed, it causes me to step back with a lack of confidence. In school I would love the moments where I could confidently raise my hand because I knew the answer. But you don’t raise your hand when you aren’t sure, at least I wouldn’t.

That’s what makes this passage in 2 Corinthians so peculiar to us, because it says God delights in our weaknesses, hardships, persecutions and difficulties. He doesn’t want us only when we know the answer; he wants us especially when we don’t! You see, when I am strong or confident, then I get the attention and praise as the hero of the situation. But when I am weak, I step aside and God steps into the role as the hero because it is HIS strength working through me. Too often we think of the characters of the Bible as heroes who did great things that we should look up to, but that is misguided admiration. The Bible is full of people who were weak and made mistakes, and yet God used them anyway, empowering them with His strength to do what needed to be done. The hero of the Bible isn’t Paul, Moses or David, the hero of the Bible is God.

Tullian Tchividjian says it so well in his book, *One Way Love*: “*The Bible is one long story of God meeting our rebellion with His rescue, our sin with His salvation, our guilt with His grace, our badness with His goodness. The overwhelming focus of the Bible is not the work of the redeemed but the work of the Redeemer. Which means that the Bible is not first a recipe for Christian living but a revelation book of Jesus who is the answer to our un-Christian living.*”

YOU SHOULD BE YELLING! by Pastor Dan

Verse — Ephesians 2:8-9

My last year of college, I had the privilege of rooming with both my brother and my cousin. This was my 5th year at college (That's right, I squeezed 4 years into 5, don't be jealous.), my brother's 3rd year and my cousin's 1st year. As my cousin, Justin, was getting ready to come to college, he had just bought a brand new laptop computer to get ready for school. (Remember this was the early 2000's so laptops were a pretty big deal to own.) I personally did not have a laptop and had to use the computer lab for most of my papers. Justin, being the nice guy that he was, often let me use his laptop so that I did not have to make the trek to the computer lab on a regular basis.

Usually, I would ask Justin if I could borrow his laptop just to make sure it was okay, and he would always say yes. Well, one day Justin wasn't around, and I really needed to get a paper done. I didn't want to go to the computer lab. Knowing Justin would say yes, I borrowed the laptop without asking. Well as I was finishing up the paper and was standing up, I dropped the laptop on its side, and the power cord that plugs into the laptop jammed into the laptop and broke it beyond repair!!! I was so mad at myself and expected Justin to be equally upset.

When Justin returned to the room, I let him know what happened and his response was this, (in a calm voice) "Ok. I will take it to the store and see what they tell me, and we will go from there." I couldn't believe it. if I'm honest, I was actually really upset at him for not being upset at me. I began to actually yell at him and told him to yell at me because I deserved to be yelled at for breaking his brand-new laptop. He calmly responded, "Why would I yell at you, Dan? You made a mistake."

This is the definition of Grace. This is what Jesus shows us everytime we make mistakes. We feel like we shouldn't be forgiven or that we should be yelled at, and yet he says, "I love you no matter what you do!"

I pray you remember today that no matter what you do God will always love you. That love may be *UNEXPECTED*, but it doesn't make it any less important. That, my friends, is Grace!!

AGAIN AND AGAIN AND AGAIN

by Amy

Verse — Judges 10:6-16

The curriculum we use with the kids at church covers the Bible from Genesis to Revelation over the course of three years. We spend quite a bit of time in the Old Testament. Reading the book of Judges reveals a cycle of behavior the Israelites fell into repeatedly. The people rebelled, choosing to follow other gods. God allowed them to suffer the consequences of their sin, often turning them over to their enemies. They cried out to God for help, and He raised up a judge to bring deliverance to the people. Israel experienced the lavish grace of a loving and compassionate Father instead of an uncaring “I told you so”. They had done nothing to deserve or earn it. God’s grace was a gift given because of His kindness. Even though God continually offered this grace to Israel, they stubbornly pulled away again and again and again, generation after generation.

The first time we went through the book of Judges with the kids, they caught on very quickly. After a few weeks of stories with strong similarities, a kindergartener interrupted the lesson, dramatically exclaiming, “Oh no, not again! It just keeps happening over and over and over!” Since then, each time we’ve circled back to Judges, many of the kids pick up on the cycle and ask why the Israelites never learned to do things differently. What a great question!

How often do we make the same mistake? We spend days (weeks, months, years) looking to other gods for satisfaction. We choose to believe someone or something else can provide for us better than the Lord can. Then the consequences of sin pile up until we tire of our situation and cry out to the Lord for help. Like the Israelites, we don’t deserve rescue. We are the same “obstinate children” described in Isaiah 30.

Rebellion should be met with punishment. But Isaiah 30:18 begins, “*Yet the Lord longs to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show you compassion.*” We may fail Him repeatedly. He may allow us to experience the damage our sin causes to ourselves and others. But even though we’ve done nothing to earn His favor, when we cry out for rescue, He freely gives us grace...again and again and again.

UNEXPECTED DEATH

When we were growing up, we probably all had that person that we thought was invincible. That larger than life person. That one person you knew would make everything right. Their presence was enough to calm all of your fears. I wonder if the disciples had this kind of relationship with Jesus? As long as Jesus was around, things were going to be alright. He was the one who commanded the waves and calmed the storms. Surely He was invincible. But then everything changed. Sure, He talked about His death, but none of them expected Him to actually die. What would happen now that Jesus was gone?

PRAYER FOR THE WEEKEND

Lord, so often I need to be reminded that you are still the one who calms the storms. That your presence is still with me in the midst of unexpected losses, during those times when my dreams die, and when things don't go as I expected or hoped. In those times, please remind my heart that nothing is unexpected to you.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

JESUS WAS SENT TO DIE

by Pastor Bruce

Verse — John 3:17

I can only remember a couple of times in my life where I was completely shocked when I heard about a sudden, unexpected death of a family member or close friend. My whole life came to an abrupt halt and standstill. The feeling of helplessness to say the right thing and the added frustration of being far away sent me thinking how unfair and inadequate I was to give the support that was so desperately needed at that moment.

As we study scripture, we all are made aware of how sudden and unexpected the death of Jesus was. However, there were a couple of times when Jesus informed his disciples that he was going to be handed over to the chief priests and the elders of the Law, suffer many things and be killed (Matthew 16:21). The first incident was in Caesarea Philippi, and the second time was in Galilee. The traveling time to Jerusalem was about seven days, and I cannot imagine the thoughts of confusion that the disciples were experiencing while on this long journey or perhaps how many more times Jesus reminded them of His coming death. Then finally when they were in Jerusalem, Jesus and the disciples were in the upper room when He announced that one of them would betray him. These shocking announcements, however, could never come close to the unexpected experiences Jesus was about to go through.

Jesus knew the reason why he had to die. The general population believed that He was going to destroy the Roman rule and set up an earthly kingdom.

But the sudden unexpected and horrific death of Jesus was to establish an eternal kingdom that the people could not comprehend at the time.

Through the Scripture, we now can have the assurance that Jesus sacrificed Himself so that we could be reconciled to the Father and remain heirs to His heavenly kingdom.

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through Him.” John 3:17.

THAT I MIGHT LIVE by Pastor Todd

Verse — Hebrews 9:22

Jesus's unexpected death was not what the Jew's had pictured for hundreds of years when they imagined their rescuing king. He didn't wear a crown or robes. He did not come from the capital city; He came from the unimportant town of Nazareth (John 1:46). He did not command an army. These people could not imagine how this peace-filled man could set them free from their enemies - the Romans.

We read in Hebrews 9:22 that *"The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness."*

The word that the author uses here for forgiveness is the Greek word "aphesis". This word does not mean "forgiveness" in the way that modern, English-speaking people think about forgiveness. Instead, aphasis is something closer to "deliverance" or "release." It has in mind the picture of someone who is enslaved and in chains, and someone comes along with the key to unlock and set them free.

The freedom that Jesus offers is to all who believe that He is the Son of God (*Galatians 3:28, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*). God's perfect plan was not to stop the Roman oppression of the Jews, but to stop the oppression of sin for **all** who put their faith in Jesus.

Jesus took the punishment that we deserved when He chose to suffer and die on the cross (John 10:18). His death is powerful for all that will believe because it was a once for all sacrifice for the sins of the world. There is no longer a need for sacrifice, because as Hebrews 10:10 assures us, *"we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all"*.

Through the powerful death of Jesus, we are offered forgiveness from more than our enemies, struggles, and fears; Jesus offers us the forgiveness of our sins. *"If you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* (Romans 10:9)

WHAT NEXT? by Lisa

Verse — John 11:25-26

I've always had a hard time with endings. I don't necessarily resist them, but I don't usually look forward to them with excitement. When I was a kid, I cried when the Christmas tree came down each January 1st. I don't like goodbyes; I don't like books to end; I was even a little sad for each pregnancy to end. And yet, I love new beginnings! I usually look forward to new beginnings with lots of excitement!

Ironic, I know. The two can't exist without the other. So much of life, abundant life, requires this pattern of endings and beginnings. Often, unexpectedly, the new is even better than what we could have imagined.

What if we tried to resist this pattern? If the Christmas tree stayed up all year, we'd lose the joy of decorating it at the beginning of Christmas seasons to come. If we don't finish that book, we miss out on new ones. And although labor was definitely something I didn't look forward to and really wanted to end, it had to happen for the next stage of life to begin.

Jesus had clearly talked with those closest to him about his death and resurrection. And yet, I'm sure it wasn't something his friends and family understood or looked forward to with excitement. I believe it may have been a bit unexpected, like so many things he had said or done. Death. The one they loved was gone. In their grief and fear, they had to be thinking, "What next?" They didn't know what was about to unfold, yet I believe they clung to his words. Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Life was delivered through the grave. Unimaginable. Death, typically a final, last step or ending, was the new beginning God had promised. Redemption. Ironic? Yes. Unexpected, of course. Just like Jesus.

Dear Lord, Thank you for your love, forgiveness and redemption; for your indescribable gift. Thank you for lavishing your love upon us and having so much more for us than we can ever imagine. Help us to cling to your words and to grow in our faith, trusting you in the unseen and unexpected.

A TRULY UNEXPECTED DEATH

by Pastor Ryan

Verse — Romans 10:10

When I was in 5th grade, we were assigned seats at lunch. At first I loved my new table mates, but it became clear to me very quickly that I was the odd man out. One moment in particular changed the course of my 5th grade experience when the conversation was centered around the movie “Titanic”. One boy at the table brought up that it was his new favorite movie and that anyone who had not yet watched it was now in fact a “loser”. To my surprise, everyone admitted to having watched the movie! I, however, shared with the table that because of one scene in particular, my parents would not allow me to watch it.

As a result, I spent the remainder of my 5th grade year staring at the wall every single lunch. I was afraid to talk to anyone. Occasionally, our art teacher would change the art on the wall every couple of weeks in the lunchroom, and I remember longing for something new to look at while I would eat my lunch. Anything to distract me from having to be ridiculed again. And now, I could not be more thankful for that trying time I went through in 5th grade. In my hurting, God birthed in me a deep love for the marginalized, neglected, and less fortunate. It was God's matter. I am so thankful that my experience growing up did not send me down a vindictive path. I had parents who supported me and a brother and sister who kept me humble. Mostly, however, I had a foundation set before me of knowing the truth about who I am in Christ. I understood the gospel and believed it with all my heart. I am truly amazed how much good God can do despite the mess we have created for ourselves.

When Jesus came to the earth, He came with grace, love, and hope. He then tasked us with the honor of sharing that gospel. Sadly our world has become continually more divided. Words of hate and negativity are constantly spread all over social media. What has happened is the unexpected death of friendships, families, and self worth. Let's use our platform not to contribute to the downfall of others, but rather to build them up with the lifesaving gospel of Jesus. Words can crush the spirit. But they can also lead to the life-saving grace of Jesus. “For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.” Commit to putting these words on your lips, the life-giving words of the gospel of Jesus.

THE LOWEST POINT by Pastor Jayson

Verse — John 20:19

It might seem extremely self-evident, but nothing can prepare you for an unexpected death. I think that many who haven't experienced an unexpected death, think they know what it's going to feel like. But nothing can prepare you for the immediate, life-changing aspect that a death like that can have on the people who were closest to it.

The disciples were all-in on Jesus. They had heard His message; they believed in Him, and they had given up their entire lives to follow Him. Can you imagine dropping everything in your life right now to follow someone? Giving up your house, your job, all your belongings and even turning away from your own family?

Luke 14:33, Luke 9:23, Matthew 19:21, Luke 12:33, Mark 10:17-31, Mark 8:34 In all of these passages Jesus communicates that we must surrender our lives in order to follow him.

Now imagine that you surrendered your entire life. You sold everything you own and gave away your money. You said goodbye to your family. You agreed to wander around, following this person you believe to be the Messiah. Jesus took Peter, James and John to the Mount of Transfiguration. All the disciples saw miracles performed by Jesus that could only be compared to the ancient stories from the prophets and the Torah. And just when things got to the highest point, Jesus was arrested, tortured and finally publicly executed. Things had not gone as planned.

Human nature tends to make us believe that we are at the end of the story. That's just how our minds work. But just like the disciples at the beginning of the third day, our story isn't over yet. Jesus is coming...

UNEXPECTED RESURRECTION

Throughout His time with the disciples, Jesus told them on many occasions that He was going to die, but He also told them that He would rise again. Now to be fair, He said it in a way that was kind of cryptic, and the disciples were not usually that great at picking up on Jesus' teaching. So even though He told them the plan, it still surprised them when they heard the tomb was empty. They were locked in a room trying to process everything that had taken place and wondering what was going to happen...right up until Jesus walked in the room. Isn't that just like Jesus to unexpectedly breathe new life into everything that comes next?

PRAYER FOR THE WEEKEND

Jesus, Thank you for the way that you breathe new life into the places in my life that seem to have no hope. In the places where dreams have died, where I have experienced loss; thank you for making a way for me to experience a resurrection of life in those areas because you have a way of turning hopeless into hopeful.

In Jesus Name, Amen.

DID I HEAR MY NAME? by Pastor Ann

Verse — John 20:11-18

In my early years of ministry, I travelled frequently and would spend large amounts of time in different countries. Being away from home and the familiar people in my life was always a challenge, but every once in a while I would see someone in a place where they were not expected. On one occasion I was walking in downtown Hong Kong and across the street I saw a very good friend from home. Someone I loved and who was connected to the most important pieces of my life. To see that face and hear the familiar voice...it was pure joy in such an UNEXPECTED place. Even though we parted ways far too soon, it was such an encouragement to me as I continued my ministry there.

I have to believe that was how Mary felt in the garden that day when she went to the tomb. Mary is weeping, looking into the tomb where she expected to find Jesus' body, and encounters angels instead. She has so many questions. Where have they taken him? How can I find him? As she turns to leave, she encounters a man she assumes is the gardener...of course she doesn't think it's Jesus; she isn't expecting him to be there. She begins to ask him all of her questions, and Jesus responds by simply saying her name...Mary!

Oh what an UNEXPECTED, beautiful sound that voice must have been, to hear her name from the one she loved. She came to that place with no hope, simply to care for the body of her Lord. Instead she was given hope; she was given back the one to whom her heart belonged. When she announced to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!", there was so much in that statement. I have seen the one I love. I have seen the one who loves me. I never thought I would hear that voice again. I believe the reality of that very unexpected encounter would sustain her throughout her life every time she remembered hearing her name.

What are some places in your life where you have unexpectedly encountered the Lord? How have those moments helped sustain and encourage you?

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND? by Pastor Dan

Verse — John 20:10-18

Have you ever had those stories that, after you tell people, they just stare at you? You know, the stories where after they are staring at you for a bit you say, “Well, I guess you had to be there.” That had to be how Mary Magdalene felt when encountering Jesus after he was raised from the dead.

Jesus tells Mary in John 20:17 to go and tell the disciples that He has risen. She had to walk away from that conversation going, “There is no way they are going to believe me!” And yet she does what Jesus commanded.

As I reflect on the resurrection of our Savior, I think sometimes I take it for granted. I have heard the account of Jesus rising from the dead so often that it has become “normal” instead of “incredibly-awestruck-amazing”. Even as I am writing this devotional, I was trying to think of a cool story or illustration to help illustrate the amazingness of the resurrection. Then it hit me...”Why in the world do I need help explaining the amazingness of somebody rising from the dead?!?!”

Take a moment and try to remember the last time you were awestruck by what Jesus did by coming back to life. I mean, HE CONQUERED DEATH!! Are you not AMAZED? Are you not blown away by the victory against Satan? Does this not excite you?

I think sometimes we take for granted things we have read our whole lives. If someone told you this story today and looked at the expression on your face as they told you, would they follow up with, “I guess you had to be there.”?

Let me challenge you this Easter season to read these passages like it’s the first time you have ever read them, to see the UNEXPECTED event that occurred. Allow the greatness of what happened almost 2000 years ago sink into your mind. Remember that all that was done back then was for you and for me. Give yourself permission to be excited about a God who loves you so much that he sent his Son to die and then conquer death. Sometimes you need to sit back and just say WOW!!

Verse — John 20:1-10

Looking at me, the first words that come to your mind would definitely be athlete and runner. Okay, those two words may be a little bit of a stretch. You could have said that about a quarter of a century ago when I was just getting ready to graduate high school. Amazingly enough, I was part of the top flight doubles for my high school's tennis team, and our team competed for a state championship my senior year. I won't bore you with the details, but that is the truth.

Thinking about the unexpected resurrection and my athletic prowess, my mind immediately goes to the story of Mary Magdalene when she encounters Peter and John that Easter morning. Not remembering the words of Jesus, Mary told the two disciples that someone must have taken the body of Jesus. At those words, Peter and John took off running to the tomb to see for themselves. John wants to make sure you know he beat Peter to the empty tomb.

The story of the great race makes me wonder. If I was there on Easter morning and heard the words of Mary Magdalene, would my reaction be the same as Peter and John? Would I take off in a sprint to reach the tomb? Would I want to beat both Peter and John to confirm what Mary just told me? In my current physical condition, would I make it more than 50 yards?

There are days in my spiritual journey when I am more apt to just take a leisurely stroll to the tomb. The urgency to find where Jesus has gone is not present. I might even just wait for a text message from Peter and John that confirms what Mary said.

I believe I am not alone. Here is the good news--We may have mailed in our competitiveness on previous race days, but we can be ready for the next one. My goal is to be spiritually fit so that when the next race is set I am ready. There is no way I am going to let John beat me to the empty tomb.

DEATH WAS ARRESTED by Pastor Katie

Verse — 1 Corinthians 15

By now you probably know or have heard that I love music! It's one of the ways that I really connect with God. Last Easter we did a song called "Death was Arrested" by North Point InsideOut. I love that song! It is a description of the beautiful picture of what Jesus did for us through His life, death, and resurrection.

There is nothing we have been given that is more valuable than our salvation. The lyrics of this song allow for us to reflect on what Jesus did so that we could have salvation. The Good News of the Gospel is that God accepts us no matter what we've done. As the song says, "My shame was a ransom He faithfully bore, He cancelled my debt and He called me His friend, when death was arrested and my life began." What a wonderful, encouraging truth. That's the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul began his letter to the Corinthians, he focused on the cross. But in chapter 15, as he is nearing the end of this letter, he begins to explain the importance of Jesus' resurrection. Without the life, death, AND resurrection of Jesus, all of this would be for nothing. Sometimes we don't put enough emphasis on the resurrection of Jesus. We remember that He died for each of us which is HUGE, but our whole faith hinges on whether or not Jesus rose from the dead! If He didn't, Christianity would be irrelevant. When He did, putting our faith in Jesus is all that matters. 1 Corinthians 15:55-58 gives us the charge that we, as believers, can and should give thanks to God, who gives us victory. Our work is not in vain or void of purpose because of Jesus' resurrection.

I would encourage you to listen to this song today. It's a great way to thank Jesus for the undeserved gift of grace which we celebrate at Easter. As we celebrate the Resurrection of our King, you can sing this song to Jesus and know that He died to save us. Don't be sad or feel guilty but accept Jesus and celebrate that Jesus is alive, He rose again! Amen to that!

DEAD MAN WALKING by Pastor Phil**Verse — John 11:1-45**

“Jesus said to her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” John 11:21-26

Recently I sat with one of our nation’s heroes--a senior saint who served in Korea during the Korean War. He shared the story of injuries, including an abdominal shot, that nearly took his life. In fact, they thought he was dead. He was placed in a burial bag, and his information was placed on a tag they attached to his toe. He was placed among those who gave their lives--until he began to awaken and yelled to be let out. I’m pretty sure those who were in the tent turned several shades of white before his rescue and care was given.

The reaction was likely similar when Jesus UNEXPECTEDLY resurrected his friend Lazarus from a permanent resting place. But the story in John 11 (I really encourage you to read the entire passage.) isn’t just about Lazarus. In fact, for me, the real story is about the events leading up to Jesus’ powerful working. In John 11, we see some of the very common accusations people make when Christ doesn’t show up when or how they want: “He doesn’t care!” (*“could not he...have kept this man from dying” vs 37*) or “He didn’t show up!” (*“Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” vs 21*).

But perhaps the most powerful truth in this passage are Jesus’ words to Martha when he said “I am the resurrection and the life” (verse 25). When Jesus said these words, He wasn’t merely promising that SOME DAY Lazarus would live... but He was offering that for those who trust in Him, they can begin living today. And perhaps the most powerful image in John 11 is found in the shortest verse of scripture, verse 35 “Jesus wept.” Those two verses together teach the incredible love Christ has for us and the incredible Hope that we can live again, no matter what seems to have died, when we come to Him. How UNEXPECTED!

LORD, Forgive me when I accuse you and deny you when you don’t show up how or when I want you to. I thank you that you are the Life Giver. I ask you to come into those hurt, wounded, and dead places in my life today and bring HOPE, HEALING, and LIFE.

NOTES:

COME CELEBRATE
EASTER
WITH US!

SATURDAY - 6:00 PM

SUNDAY - 8:30 AM

SUNDAY - 10:00 AM

SUNDAY - 11:20 AM

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