

## **Title Slide #1**

### **SURPRISE IN A GRAVEYARD**

John 20:1-18 and Luke 24:1-12

## **Slide #2**

It was February, 27, 1991, the height of Desert Storm, when Ruth Dillow received a very sad message from the Pentagon. It stated that her son, Clayton Carpenter, Private 1st Class, had stepped on a mine in Kuwait and was dead.

Ruth Dillow later wrote, "I can't begin to describe my grief and shock. It was almost more than I could bear. For 3 days I wept. For 3 days I expressed anger and loss. For 3 days people tried to comfort me, to no avail because the loss was too great." But then after 3 days, Ruth Dillow received that message, the telephone rang. The voice on the other end said, "Hi, Mom, it's me. I'm alive." (1) Surprise, Ruth Dillow, the son you thought was dead is alive.

## **Slide #3**

That was clearly the reaction of Christ's disciples and closest friends that first Easter day. Luke tells us some of the women took spices to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the mouth of tomb. When they went inside Christ's body was not there. Suddenly two men in gleaming white clothes stood beside them. The women bowed down their faces with fright, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: 'The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.'" Then they remembered Christ's words. Surprise!

## **Slide #4**

John focuses on Christ's appearance to Mary Magdalene. Mary comes to the tomb and sees that the stone has been rolled away. So she runs to Simon Peter and John, and says, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!" Peter and John start for the tomb. When they, too, find it empty, what do they do? They simply go back to the house where they were staying. There was no celebration, no cries of, "He's alive. He's alive." You might expect those who knew Christ best to be bubbling over with excitement that first Easter Sunday morning, because he had been delivered from the tomb, just as he said. Instead, they were totally mystified that his body was gone. They didn't expect him to be alive any more than Ruth Dillow expected her son to be alive.

As for Mary, she stands outside the tomb crying. She bends over to look into the tomb and sees two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They ask her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she explains, "and I don't know where they have put him." At this, she turns around and sees Jesus standing there, but she doesn't recognize him.

"Woman," he says, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he's the gardener, she says, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him." Jesus calls her name, "Mary." She turns toward him and cries out "Teacher." Surprise!

### **Slide #5**

The story of Easter is no carefully contrived story designed by Jesus' followers. The story of Easter is the honest report of baffled believers who had no idea where Christ was leading them until he appeared to them. And then, "Surprise!"

No wonder people all over the world gather today to celebrate the event of the resurrection. **Jesus Christ who was dead is SURPRISE alive!**

### **Slide #6**

Pastor Michael Slaughter tells of traveling to Moscow with a group of church leaders in April 1992 just as the Cold War was ending. These Christian leaders were there to celebrate Russia's first Easter after the fall of the Iron Curtain. A large banner proclaiming "Christ has risen" loomed over Red Square. Slaughter says he couldn't help noticing that less than twenty-five yards away stood Lenin's Tomb, the father of the Soviet Revolution. It struck him as ironic that the banner with "Christ has risen" on it overshadowed the tomb of the Communist leader who had once proclaimed that God was dead. Surprise! Lenin is dead. Stalin is dead. Communism is dead. But Christ lives on!

### **Slide #7**

Christ is alive. In 1 Corinthians 15:3-7 the Apostle Paul wrote, "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have died. . ."

Did you catch that? **The risen Christ had appeared to more than five hundred believers, most of whom were still alive when Paul was writing.** All it would have taken to shake Paul's witness would have been one of those 500 who had encountered the risen Christ to refute his testimony, but none of them did. To their minds, there was no doubt. Christ is alive. Nothing in the ancient world refutes that testimony. The tomb was empty. The body was missing. Even more importantly, hundreds of lives were changed by the appearance of Jesus after his death.

### **Slide #8**

Nothing in the ancient world refutes that testimony. **Nothing in the modern world refutes that testimony either.** It always has been fashionable in some circles to doubt Christ's resurrection. The critical mind cannot accept what cannot be proved or, at least, that's what we say. And yet we are not always so resistant to alternative ideas. We accept many things that cannot yet be proved.

Suppose I were to tell you, for example, that some scientists entertain the hope that someday it might be possible to take a strand of DNA and recreate, or reformulate, or resurrect, if you will, a living human being in a laboratory--would you agree that such a thing might indeed be possible? I'm not saying that it is probable! Many of us would have no problem accepting the possibility that science might indeed perform such a miracle. After all, modern science is producing miracles all the time. Nothing in the modern world refutes the testimony of the resurrection. In fact, Science does more to reinforce our faith than refute it.

Only a month or so ago, Scientists from Geneva, Switzerland announced the confirmation of the discovery of the Higgs boson. This is the particle which explains how other particles get their mass. It is interesting to read that scientists are looking for what they call the God-particle that supposedly will explain how it all began in the first place. I can tell you how it all began and I don't have to spend billions of dollars building a super collider under the Swiss Alps to do it. "In the beginning God created the earth and all that is in it . . ."

### **Slide #9**

Do you know the name of George Frederic Handel? He wrote the "Hallelujah Chorus," after he was stricken with blindness in 1751. Handel claimed he had a vision and that this chorus is that vision set to music. If you have ever heard the performance of Handel's "Messiah" you would confirm Handel's explanation as your own soul is lifted into paradise by those inspiring voices.

The “Hallelujah Chorus,” expresses the thought that Christ shall reign for ever and ever. This is sung over and over again with the grand ending coming with the words “And he shall reign for ever and ever, King of kings and Lord of lords! Hallelujah, hallelujah!”

Here is how Bob Smith expressed the experience of being swept up by the sound of the choir’s voices: “I frankly confess that my soul was stirred profoundly, my mind was quickened spiritually and my imagination carried me beyond things earthly, beyond the stars, into the very midst of the paradise of God. I saw a great chorus which no one could number assembled before the shining white throne. Most intently did I listen to the song which they sang. It was a song of triumph to the King of kings, telling of his wondrous achievements and of the universal and permanency of his reign. In the midst of their song I heard the voices of the patriarchs peal forth, ‘For he shall reign for ever and ever.’ Then I heard the voices of the prophets add, ‘For he shall reign for ever and ever.’ Then the voices of the apostles and church fathers followed, ‘For he shall reign for ever and ever.’ Then the voices of the martyrs triumphantly sang, ‘For he shall reign for ever and ever’ . . . Then the patriarchs, prophets, apostles, church fathers, martyrs . . . with the angels of God and all the redeemed of the ages, joined in one grand chorus, and my spirit was lifted to bliss supernal, to ecstasy supreme, as they pealed forth the blessed, the glorious, the triumphant strain, ‘For he shall reign for ever and ever, King of kings! and Lord of Lords! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!’” (2)

### **Slide #10**

Most of us couldn’t express it that well, but this is the music of Easter. It is the joyous surprise of Mary, and Peter and those other 500 believers to whom the risen Christ appeared. And it is the song that rings in our hearts again this day, that this Jesus is no longer dead but He is alive. Amen.

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1. Melvin M. Newland, <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/easter--what-a-difference-melvin-newland-sermon-on-easter-resurrection-33346.asp>.
  2. *Modern Messages from Great Hymns* (New York: The Abingdon Press, 1916).