



Sunday, March 15, 2026
John 9:1-12 (Fourth Sunday in Lent)

Ascension Lutheran Church
Pastor Tony Acompanado

There are surprises in life...and then there are *surprises*. There's the kind of surprise where someone throws you a birthday party and you pretend you didn't suspect anything – even though they accidentally texted you about it. There's the surprise of Wisconsin weather in April – warm and sunny one day – cold and snowy the next. There's the surprise when ordering candy for your Easter children's message and when you get the delivery notice telling you who's delivering your package this is what you see (*photo of delivery notice and the drivers name was Jesus*). Then there are those bigger surprises – unexpected good news, a second chance you didn't think you'd ever get, a moment when life turns in a way you never saw coming. But Easter? Easter isn't just another surprise. **Easter is the greatest surprise ever.** Because no one – *no one* – went to the tomb expecting to find what they did.

We've walked a long road together. From the ashes of Lent, where we began a journey of reflection and repentance while being reminded of our mortality. We followed Jesus through the growing tension of his ministry, into the joyous shouts of Palm Sunday where hope seemed within reach. We sat at the table on Maundy Thursday, hearing again Jesus command to love. We stood in the shadows of Good Friday, where the weight of sin and death pressed heavily upon us. And as we travel alongside Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on the way to the tomb this morning, we must remind ourselves that they watched the crucifixion. They saw Jesus die. They saw Joseph take Jesus' body, wrap it in a cloth, and put it in the tomb. They saw a giant stone close the entrance to the tomb. And then came the silence – a deafening silence. So as we enter this day we remember that the women went to the tomb not with the hope of seeing Jesus alive, but with grief. They went expecting death to have the final word. They carried spices, not expectations. They carried sorrow, not hope. But God had other plans. Suddenly – an earthquake. An angel. A stone rolled away. Guards frozen in fear. And the message that changes everything... "*He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.*"

Christ is risen!

The greatest surprise ever. And it's not just surprising – it's earth shaking, world-altering. Because resurrection isn't simply a happy ending to a sad story. Resurrection is God's decisive act of restoration and redemption. It is God saying, once and for all, that sin and death do not get the last word. Despair is not the end of the story. So this morning let's take a few moments to notice just what kind of surprise this is.

First, it's a surprise of **restoration**. Everything about Good Friday looked like failure. Jesus' ministry – ended. His followers – scattered. His promises – seemingly broken. The cross looked like the triumph of violence, injustice, and despair. But Easter morning reveals something deeper – God wasn't absent in that suffering. God was at work *through it*. The resurrection restores what seemed lost. It restores hope where there was despair. It restores life where there was death. It restores relationship where there had been separation. And not just for Jesus, but for us. Because how many places in our lives feel beyond repair? Broken relationships. Illness. Regret over things we've said or done. Guilt. Parts of ourselves we'd rather hide. The fear that some things can never be made right again. We know all too well what it is to sit in the uncertainty when prayers seem to go unanswered and hope feels distant. But into all of this – into our personal struggles and shared human suffering – Easter speaks. Easter reminds us that God is in the business of restoration. Not by pretending brokenness doesn't happen, but by bringing new life out of it.

Second, it is a surprise of **redemption**. The cross was meant to be an instrument of oppression, shame, and defeat. But in God's hands, it becomes the very place where love is poured out most fully. And the resurrection is God's declaration that love is stronger than death. Every force of sin and evil that seems so powerful in our world – violence, greed, injustice, hatred, division, despair – Easter confronts them all and says, you do not win. But that doesn't mean those things disappear overnight. We still see them. We still feel their weight. But the resurrection means they are no longer ultimate. God has already begun the work of redeeming the world, and nothing can stop it. Even now, in ways both seen and unseen, God is bringing life out of death, hope out of despair, justice out of injustice.



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And that leads to the third surprise – **inclusion**. Who are the first witnesses to the resurrection? Not the powerful. Not the religious elite. Not the ones society would expect. But women – those whose testimony in that time was often dismissed or overlooked. And not only that – the *disciples* Jesus sends them to? They’re the ones who ran away. The ones who failed. The ones who abandoned him. And yet Jesus says, “*Go and tell my brothers...*” Not “those failures.” Not “those who let me down.”... “*My brothers.*” Easter is radically inclusive. It includes the fearful. The doubtful. The broken. The ones who got it wrong. It includes *you*, and it includes *me*. No matter where you’ve been. No matter what you’re carrying. No matter what doubts or questions or struggles you have. The risen Christ meets you where you are and calls you family.

And finally, Easter is a surprise of **invitation**. The angel says, “Come and see... then go and tell.” The women encounter the risen Christ – and then what does Jesus say? “*Do not be afraid.*” Do not be afraid. Those words echo across time into our lives today. Do not be afraid of what feels uncertain. Do not be afraid of the broken places in your life. Do not be afraid of a world that sometimes seems overwhelmed by darkness. Because the risen Christ is already ahead of us. He goes before us into our workplaces, our homes, our communities. He goes before those who are struggling, seeking refuge or longing for a place to belong. He goes before us into every place where fear tries to take root – and he brings peace. Easter is not just about what *God has done*; it’s about what *God is still doing*. God is still restoring what is broken. God is still redeeming what seems lost. God is still planting hope where despair once lived. God is still calling us to live as people of the resurrection. And that means we are invited to participate in this new life. To live the way Jesus lived. To choose love when it would be easier to turn away. To show kindness when the world feels harsh. To extend grace when judgment seems more natural. To be people who welcome the stranger, stand with the vulnerable, and work for justice. To be people who carry hope into hopeless places. Because the resurrection isn’t just something we celebrate – it’s something we embody. Every act of compassion, every word of peace, every moment of forgiveness becomes a small echo of that empty tomb. Every time we choose love over fear, we participate in God’s kingdom breaking into the world. This is the joy of Easter – that the same power that raised Jesus from the dead is at work in us. Notice that Jesus sends them out. Because Easter isn’t something we just observe – it’s something we’re invited into. We’re invited into a new way of living. A resurrection life. A life that trusts that even when things seem dark, God is at work. A life that refuses to give in to despair. A life that chooses love, even when it’s hard. A life that seeks justice, practices mercy, and walks humbly with God. A life that reflects the reality that Christ is risen – not just on Easter morning, but every day. So what does this mean for us today? It means that when we look at the world and see division, violence, and suffering, we don’t lose hope. Because the resurrection has already begun to overcome sin and evil. It means that when we face struggles in our own lives – fear, grief, uncertainty – we remember that death is not the end of the story. It means that when we’re tempted to believe that nothing can change – that people can’t change, that systems can’t change, that *we* can’t change – Easter says otherwise. God is still rolling away stones. God is still surprising us. God is still bringing life out of death. And it means that we are called to live as resurrection people. People who forgive when it would be easier to hold a grudge. People who welcome when it would be easier to exclude. People who love when it would be easier to turn away. People who hope – even when hope feels risky.

Because the greatest surprise ever is not just that Jesus rose from the dead. It’s that his resurrection is still unfolding. In us and through us. So today, we celebrate. We sing. We rejoice. We proclaim.

Christ is risen!

But we also go out – like those first witnesses – carrying the good news into a world that desperately needs it.

Christ is risen!

And because he lives we have hope. Because he lives we have life. And because he lives...love will never fail.

Christ is risen! Amen.