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 Title: *A Day of Surprises*  
 Text: Luke 23:26-49  
 Preacher: Mark Adams

Life is full of surprises--and this week I came across a story that is a great example of this principle.

Eastern Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in New York, has a program that allows convicts to take courses taught by the faculty at nearby Bard College. Some of those inmate/students formed a debate club and back in 2015 after reading that Harvard University's Debate team had won the national title, these convicts invited the Ivy League undergrads to come up to the prison for a friendly competition. The Harvard National Champs accepted the challenge. And surprise--when the debate was over--a three-judge panel concluded that the Bard team had raised strong arguments that the Harvard team had failed to consider and declared the team of inmates the winners.

The Harvard Debaters posted a note on their Facebook page graciously congratulating the inmates. It said, *"There are few teams we are prouder of having lost a debate to than the phenomenally intelligent and articulate team we faced this weekend, and we are incredibly thankful to Bard and the Eastern New York Correctional Facility for the work they do and for organizing this event."*

This surprising story came to mind as I prepared this message because a careful look at the events of the day Jesus died on the cross for our sins shows us that it was a day that was full of surprises. Take your Bibles and turn to the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel. Follow along as I read, starting with verse 26 and if able stand as I read.

Luke 23:26-49

**26 - As the soldiers led [Jesus] away, they seized Simon from Cyrene, who was on his way in from the country, and put the cross on him and made him carry it behind Jesus.**

**27 - A large number of people followed Him, including women who mourned and wailed for Him.**

**28 - Jesus turned and said to them, *"Daughters of Jerusalem, do not weep for Me; weep for yourselves and for your children."***

**29 - *For the time will come when you will say: 'Blessed are the childless women, the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed!'***

**30 - *Then 'they will say to the mountains: "Fall on us!" and to the hills, "Cover us!"'***

**31 - *For if people do these things when the tree is green, what will happen when it is dry?"'***

**32 - Two other men, both criminals, were also led out with Him to be executed.**

**33 - When they came to the place called the Skull, they crucified Him there, along with the criminals—one on His right, the other on His left.**

**34 - Jesus said, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."* And they divided up His clothes by casting lots.**

**35 - The people stood watching, and the rulers even sneered at him. They said, *"He saved others; let Him save himself if He is God's Messiah, the Chosen One."***

**36 - The soldiers also came up and mocked Him. They offered Him wine vinegar**

**37 - and said, *"If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself."***

**38 - There was a written notice above Him, which read: *"This is the King of the Jews."***

**39 - One of the criminals who hung there, hurled insults at Him: *"Aren't you the Messiah? Save Yourself and us!"***

**40 - But the other criminal rebuked him. *"Don't you fear God," he said, "since you are under the same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this Man has done nothing wrong."***

**42 - Then he said, *"Jesus, remember me when You come into Your kingdom."***

**43 - Jesus answered him, *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in paradise."***

**44 - It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon,**

**45 - for the sun stopped shining. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.**

**46 - Jesus called out with a loud voice, “Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit.” When He had said this, He breathed His last.**

**47 - The centurion, seeing what had happened, praised God and said, “Surely this was a righteous Man.”**

**48 - When all the people who had gathered to witness this sight saw what took place, they beat their breasts and went away.**

**49 - But all those who knew Him, including the women who had followed Him from Galilee, stood at a distance, watching these things.**

Now please understand, to the typical Jerusalem resident the day Jesus was crucified began in a way that was not all that different from any other, because back in that day and age the Romans were always crucifying someone. I mean, crucifixion was a common thing.

But Jesus’ crucifixion was UNCOMMON. It stood out. The people who witnessed what happened that first Good Friday would testify that it was a day that was anything but routine. Things happened that shocked people—things that got their attention and made them think.

This morning I want us to use our time to review the surprising---SHOCKING---experiences of those people who were there in Jerusalem that first Good Friday.

**1.) Let’s begin by looking at this man named SIMON mentioned in verse 26 for he was surprised that day.**

Dr. Luke tells us he was from Cyrene, a city in North Africa in the region of Libya, more specifically, modern day Tripoli. There was a large Jewish community in Tripoli back then and Simon had no doubt come to Jerusalem as a pilgrim---a pilgrim on the journey of a lifetime. I imagine he had saved his money for years in order to be able to afford to travel all the way to the Holy City to observe Passover. In fact, I like to think the surprising event in our text happened right after Simon arrived in Jerusalem. In my mind he had just gotten off the caravan, checked into his “hotel” and was beginning to explore the Holy City that he had heard about all his life.

And never having been here before, he must have been surprised when he stumbled across a crucifixion parade on those unfamiliar streets. But then, what normally would have been a brief delay as he waited for the procession to pass by---turned into so much more. Now as I said, crucifixions were normal back and here’s what this normal procedure looked like. After a man was tried, convicted, and condemned, he would be forced to carry his own cross as he was escorted to the place of his crucifixion by four Roman soldiers. The Romans always intentionally took the longest possible route from the courtroom to the place of execution in those cruel parades, hoping to cross the paths of as many people as possible. You see, they wanted their subjects to have a vivid reminder that the penalty for breaking their laws was certain, brutal, and extreme. That was the purpose of this grotesque parade.

If you’ve ever been to Jerusalem and walked the “*Via Dolorosa*,” the route Jesus took as He carried His cross, you know that these days it is lined with restaurants and booths selling all kinds of things. That’s the way it was in Jesus’ day---the Romans specifically took their victims where they knew people would be. It would be like them going to our busiest mall and forcing the victim to carry his cross past every store on both levels, including the eatery.

Well, as I said, this should have just been a brief delay for Simon; just a few minutes, enough time the three victims and their guards to go by. But a surprising thing happened. Jesus crumbled under the weight of His cross--right at Simon’s feet!

You may remember that the day of Jesus’ arrest had been a tiring one, so tiring that His disciples couldn’t keep their eyes open while Jesus prayed that night in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then, after His arrest, an already exhausted Jesus had been beaten literally within an inch of His life. So, it is understandable that His remaining strength would give out. And it did, but right as He crossed Simon-the-pilgrim/tourist’s path.

Now, as an occupied city, Roman law gave its soldiers the right of conscription. In other words, they could draft anyone they wanted to do their bidding at a moment’s notice. The custom was for a soldier to take the flat part of his spear

blade and put it on the shoulder of any person anywhere, and that person was immediately brought into the service of Rome.

Well, with Jesus and His cross on the ground, one of the Roman soldiers realized Jesus could go no further so he exercised this right. He took his spear and put the blade on the shoulder of the closest able-bodied man, who turned out to be this Simon from Tripoli. Thus conscripted, poor Simon was forced to pick up Jesus' cross and carry it. I'm sure he was not only surprised but also embarrassed and even angry at the Romans.

Now, Luke doesn't tell us anything else about Simon. But this man from Cyrene does appear at least two more times in the New Testament: in Matthew 27:32, and in Mark 15:21. The fact that Simon is mentioned in all three synoptic gospels: Matthew, Mark, and Luke---well, it suggests that Simon's later history was known to each of the gospel writers, which would indicate that he became a Christian.

Another thing we should note is that in his account of this incident Mark expands on that of Luke and tells us that Simon was the father of Alexander and Rufus. And I'm sure you'd agree that it's an unusual thing for a father to be identified by his children, unless of course the children were famous, well-known. So, we can assume that by the time Mark's gospel was circulated, two of the most famous Christians in the empire were Simon's boys, Alexander and Rufus. I mean, the only reason Mark would have mentioned them by name would be because he knew his readers would know who he was talking about. Later in Romans 16:13, we find Rufus mentioned again, described as the son of a woman whom the Apostle Paul considered his surrogate mother.

Now, as I said a moment ago, if you put the pieces together, it becomes obvious that Simon became a Christian. And to me that's NOT surprising. I mean, how could you literally walk with Jesus, helping Him carry the cross---how could you share that journey with Jesus---how could you look in His face---and NOT? Simon's surprising, forced, conscription to carry Jesus' cross became a doorway to eternal life for him.

I think we can also deduce that when he returned home to Tripoli, Simon told the story of the Christ and the crucifixion to his wife, who not only became a Christian herself, but also a substitute mother to the famous apostle Paul. Simon shared his faith with his sons Alexander and Rufus as well, who apparently became two of the greatest Christians in the church.

So, what started out as a frustrating surprise and an embarrassment turned out to be a wonderful, serendipitous event for Simon and for his entire family. In fact, I'm sure he would tell you that his "chance" encounter with Jesus was the best thing that ever happened to him! I mean the purpose of a pilgrimage is to get closer to God, and Simon met God in the flesh!

But, before we move on in our review of this day of days, let's ponder Simon's experience a bit longer. Think with me--Simon came to Jerusalem out of religious duty but met and decided to follow Jesus Christ. And you know, maybe that's your perspective this morning. Maybe you're here this Palm Sunday out of religious obligation or to make your wife or your husband or your parents or even God happy. Maybe someone said, *"Hey, it's Palm Sunday. You should go to church."* And you came reluctantly, but you came. Maybe you are watching online for similar reasons.

Well, that's okay. The point is you're here. We are sharing this moment and as we do I would say, pay attention---because you can never tell what might happen to you as you're worshiping this morning. You might run into Jesus. I mean, this could be a turning point in your life. It certainly was for Simon!

So, even if you're here this morning against your will---or watching online because you have nothing better to do---even if you'd rather be sleeping in or heading to the golf course, open your eyes and ears, open your heart---because something surprising could happen to you---something life changing, eternity impacting! In fact, if you are here and are not a Christian, then I believe that right now you ARE encountering our Savior. I believe that right now He's knocking on your heart's door.

Your life as it is feels uncomfortable, you yearn for more and our study of this text has helped you see the need to have Jesus in your life. Well, if that describes you, follow Simon's example and invite Jesus in!

**2.) The next people who had a surprise encounter that day were some WOMEN standing on the route Jesus' crucifixion parade took.**

Luke tells us that after Simon was enlisted to help Jesus carry His Cross, they continued the journey to the place that in Latin is called, "*Calvary*," or in English "*the Skull*."

On the way there Jesus passed a group of women who were crying and mourning.

In fact, they were screaming out---not because they knew Jesus---because in all probability they had never met Him. These were not the "**women who had followed Him from Galilee**" who are mentioned in verse 49. No these were women who lived in Jerusalem. Think of them as kind of "professional mourners."

Of course, that doesn't mean they were unsympathetic. They were women who dared to come out when men were crucified; when the families come and cry over their deaths.

Well, I'm sure they were surprised that day because never before, in all their tears, in all their wailing, in all of their journeys to all of their crosses---never before had they had a man do what Jesus did. He actually turned and expressed sympathy for THEM!

In verses 28-31 Jesus said He anticipated difficult days for their future and for the future of their children. He told them He was sorry and that they ought to wail for themselves--not for Him.

Now, as I said, I don't think these women knew Jesus. But if they had, they WOULDN'T have been surprised, because they would have quickly realized that this was just like Him. I mean, Jesus' concern was never about His own problems or His own pain. No. Jesus always focused on the problems and pain of others.

And hear me on this. It may surprise you to know that on that day, on that first Good Friday 2000 some odd years ago---it may surprise you to realize that even then, as Jesus walked behind Simon---even then---He was thinking of Your pain and suffering as well. You see, Jesus Christ, omniscient God in the flesh, was dying for You and me. That's why He was there that day.

And even then, even back in that ancient instant, Jesus knew that. His all-knowing mind knew that His suffering and death was for our sin and rebellion---yours and mine! His death was payment for every sin you and I and every human being ever born would commit. And I believe each of those infractions, sinful thoughts, words, deeds, omissions--all of our sin--each of our sins--was on Jesus' mind that day. Let me put it this way, as those women were shocked to see, Jesus wasn't focused on His agony and the further agony that waited Him on Golgotha, but rather on your agony and mine.

How does that make you feel?

I mean, we talk about the cross so much that we kind of become as desensitized as those Roman soldiers, but the fact is that was God carrying that cross! And God is all-knowing and completely loving. So, way back then on that day of days, His heart of love was breaking for you and me! Jesus was knowingly, willfully dying for our sin!

You know, when a criminal was put to death on a Roman cross, the soldiers scrawled out the nature of his crime on a sign that was hung around His neck---so that onlookers could see the offense that led to his crucifixion. Well, in Colossians 2:13-14 Paul says that Jesus took our guilt and nailed it to His cross. He took our sins, yours and mine, the charges that were against us, the handwritten death sentences that belonged around our necks---and carried them with Him as He was nailed to the cross. The only Son of God died conscious of the fact that He was doing so for every sin that you and I commit.

This week I read that in China, the extremely wealthy can avoid prison terms by hiring someone to take their place. This enables the super-rich in China to get away with pretty much anything. For example, a wealthy 20-year-old named Hu was drag racing his friends, when he struck and killed a pedestrian. Although Hu received a three-year prison sentence, the man who showed up in court and served the three-year sentence wasn't Hu at all, but someone paid to take his sentence. In another case, the owner of a demolition company that illegally demolished a home hired a destitute man and promised him \$31 for each day he spent in jail. In China, the practice is so common that there is even a term for it: "substitute criminal."

This may seem scandalous, but on that Good Friday 2000 years ago something infinitely MORE scandalous happened as Jesus became our substitute and took the punishment we deserve. He took the penalty of all our sins in his own body on the Cross. As Heerman put it in his hymn text: *"For ME, kind Jesus, was Thy incarnation, Thy mortal sorrow, and Thy life's oblation; Thy death of anguish and Thy bitter passion---for MY salvation."*

And make sure you understand what I'm saying. Jesus didn't just die impersonally for all humanity lumped together. No. He died personally, "individually," for you and me. Does that surprise you? Does it shock you, humble you, convict you, to know that on that day Jesus' mind and heart was focused on you? It was!!!

### **3.) This reminds me of another group of surprised people---JESUS' EXECUTIONERS.**

In fact, I think the biggest surprise that day came to these tough, veteran soldiers who so many times before had crucified other men by nailing them to wooden Roman crosses---and then watched them writhe in pain for hours or even days before death mercifully came. As the condemned men screamed and suffered, these soldiers would sit at the feet of the crosses and play games.

When Sue and I were in Jerusalem eight years ago, we saw this game board carved into the stone pavement floor of the ruins of the Antonia fortress in Jerusalem. And playing the first century version of Monopoly at the foot of a man writhing in agony may seem callous. But this cruel duty repeated so many hundreds of times had desensitized these men to the curses, and to the pleas, and to the threats. Their job MADE them callous. I mean, these guys were men who just were not caught by surprise. Nothing shocked them! They had seen and heard it all, every curse word and phrase conceived of by the depraved minds of tortured men---yet never before had any of these hardened soldiers heard what Jesus said that day.

For, as His hands were nailed to the cross and the nail was driven through His feet and the cross was lifted upright and dropped into its socket in the ground---instead of cursing them, Jesus prayed audibly for them saying not once but over and over and over again, ***"Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing."***

I like J. C. Ryle's insights on this text. He wrote, *"It is worthy of remark that as soon as the blood of the Great Sacrifice began to flow, [Jesus]---the Great High Priest began to intercede."* Think of it, while others were mocking Him, in fact, just as their taunting reached a fever pitch, Jesus responded in precisely the OPPOSITE way most men would have. Instead of threatening, lashing back, or cursing his executioners, Jesus prayed to God on their behalf. Even at the height of His agony, compassion was what filled His heart, compassion even for His cruel executioners, the men who had mocked Him---the men who had beat the flesh of His back into the consistency of hamburger, the men who had nailed His hands and feet to that rough cross. He had compassion on them!

And this unheard-of response was enough to surprise---SHOCK---the toughest of soldiers! So, it's no wonder that when the centurion made his final inspection after Jesus' death, he paused long enough at the cross to say, ***"Now this one, this one was a righteous man."*** (Luke 23:47) ***"Surely, this was the Son of God!"*** (Matthew 27:54)

The forgiveness of Jesus was a surprise then, but you know, it is a surprise TODAY as well. I don't know about you, but I'm still shocked at His forgiveness. I mean, Jesus knows our worst sins so well. He knows not only our sinful action and inaction, but also our lustful and hateful and even murderous thoughts. But when we ask, He still forgives us---again and again and again.

Now, the Bible clearly teaches that all sin is against God. And I know that when we are wronged our response is to get back at the person who wronged us. I mean when people trespass against us our first response is to want to trespass against them! So, I for one am surprised that no matter what our sin, no matter how disobedient and rebellious we are when it comes to God's loving law---no matter what we've done or what we do, Jesus' heart still seeks to forgive.

Mandisa Hundley is a gospel singer and back in 2005 she was one of the 12 finalists on the TV show American Idol. When she first came on stage for her tryout Simon Cowell typically, cruelly commented on her weight by saying, *"Looks like we are going to need a bigger stage this year!"*

Later when Mandisa returned to the stage to learn if she had made it to the finals, she looked right at Simon and said: *"Simon, a lot of people want me to say a lot of things to you. But this is what I want to say: yes, you hurt me, and I cried, and it was painful. It really was, but I want you to know that I've forgiven you, and that you don't need someone to apologize in order to forgive somebody. And I figure that if Jesus could die so that all of my wrongs could be forgiven, I can certainly extend that same grace to you. I just wanted you to know that."*

Mandisa was inspired by Jesus' surprising words of forgiveness from the cross. I don't know what impact her own SURPRISING words had on Simon Cowell---but millions of others heard them. Perhaps as they watched and listened---they were drawn to Jesus and the forgiveness He freely offers to all. Now, please understand, the surprises on the day Jesus died were not just for those people who lined the VIA DOLOROSA or those who clustered around the cross.

#### **4.) In fact, EVERYONE in the world was surprised that day.**

I say this because at noon, something SHOCKING happened. It became dark as if it were night. There are some today, who dismiss this astronomical miracle as an eclipse. But it could not have been an eclipse because remember, the moon is full at Passover time.

No, this was a miracle. And I'm inclined to believe that it was not limited to Jerusalem. As verses 44 and 45 say, ***"The sun stopped shining over the whole land."*** In other words, midnight came at midday, and it was a deep darkness, darker than even the darkest night. I don't think you could see your hand in front of your face. I don't think the stars or the moon were visible. It was as if the Light of the World had gone out! In fact, I would say that darkness like this had not been seen in the world since the primeval day when Genesis says, ***"The earth was without form and void and darkness was upon the face of the earth."*** I imagine the soldiers scrambled to find torches to enable them to see so they could complete their gruesome duty.

Well, this thick, eerie darkness lasted from noon until 3:00PM. Dr. R. G. Lee once commented on this by saying, *"Usually a day has but one noon, one sundown, one night. But there came a day when dreadful things took place dreadful happenings which made it a day whose darkness excelled all the darkness of all the dark days the world has ever known--a dread day with two nights."*

This day should not have surprised the Jewish religious leaders. After all, the prophet Amos had written hundreds of years earlier and said, ***"And it shall come to pass in that day, saith the Lord God, that I will cause the sun to go down at noon and I will darken the earth on a clear day."***

Well, I think it would be an understatement to say that the people living on this first Friday were surprised when this happened. They knew without a shadow of a doubt that God was doing something special; that in those 3 hours from noon until three o'clock in the afternoon, something unprecedented had occurred. And it did because in that time period the wrath of God against the sin of all mankind was poured out on Jesus Christ. As 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians 5:21 says, on that day ***"Jesus, Who knew no sin, was made sin for us."*** No wonder it was dark! It would have been incredibly inappropriate for the sun or any other light in the heavens to shine in the face of such horror. Okay---there was one more group of surprised people that day.

#### **5.) For, the PRIESTS on duty in the TEMPLE were surprised.**

If you remember your Sunday School lessons then you know that the outer courts of the temple were open to just about everyone. Then each inner court became increasingly exclusive, just for Jews, just for men, etc. And in the center of the temple was one small place, the holiest place.

God resided there, and this place was accessible only to the high priest and only once in each year on Yom Kippur---the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest would reverently, cautiously go behind this huge curtain and see something no one else could ever see---that secret place---the residence of God on earth. Then he would offer to God a sacrifice, seeking forgiveness for the entire nation of Israel. He must have been scared whenever he did this annual duty, for God had actually allowed people to die in that holy of holies, die just from the awe of coming into His presence! They even had a custom of tying a rope around the ankle of the high priest before he went in---so that if he died they could pull his body out without having to risk their own lives to go in and get it. It was a truly awesome place---an awesome thing to be in the presence of God.

So, try to imagine the surprise of those few on duty in the temple that day---a day in which the sky so dark that they had to light all the candles in order to see. Imagine their surprise when at the precise moment that Jesus uttered His last words and died, this thick curtain, a curtain that was 60 feet tall and 30 feet high and several inches thick---this curtain surrounding the Holy of Holies was torn in two from top to bottom---and opened wide so they could all see into where they never thought they would see. These priests realized that something amazing had happened. God had opened up His presence to everyone. Never again would there be a curtain that would keep God at a distance. Never again would a priest who would represent everyone else be necessary.

As I told you a couple weeks back Sue and I were able to visit the White House during the tenure of George W. Bush---and watch from a couple dozen yards as he walked across the lawn and boarded Marine 1. At one point the president turned and headed our way. I confess to thinking, *"He's spotted me. He's recognized me---probably read one of my sermons---wants to talk."* Of course, that was a foolish and prideful thought on my part---actually the president had headed our way to pat his dog. It would have been very SURPRISING for the president to spot me and want to talk to me. But you know in a far greater sense that's what happened that first Good Friday. I mean the events of this day aren't a fanciful story because God has spotted you.

He has heard you, and He has invited you. You see, that torn veil is a symbol of Jesus' torn flesh. Because of His sacrifice, we need no longer be separated from God. Hebrews 10:9-10 says, ***"Brothers and sisters, we are completely free to enter the Most Holy Place without fear because of the blood of Jesus' death. We can enter through a new and living way that Jesus opened for us. It leads through the curtain-[that is] Christ's body."***

And this leads me to point out that not only was that first Good Friday a day of surprises---it was also a day of salvation. Verse 40 tells us that one of the criminals crucified with Jesus rebuked his partner in crime who was hurling insults at our Lord and said, ***"Don't you fear God?"*** Then He asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom and Jesus promised him much more than that. He said, ***"Today you will be with Me in paradise!"*** So, the day of this criminal's crucifixion became the day of his salvation! In fact, we refer to this bad day as GOOD Friday because it has become the day of salvation for billions of others who have put their faith in Jesus Christ just as this repentant thief did.

Let me ask you a question:

What do you do with this day in history, this day of surprises? What do you do with its claims?

The lyrics of Albert Simpson's old hymn come to mind:

*"What will you do with Jesus? Neutral you cannot be.*

*One day your heart will be asking, 'What will He do with me?'"*

And the last verse says,

*"Jesus, I give Thee my heart today! Jesus, I'll follow Thee all the way,  
Gladly obeying Thee!" Will you say: "This I will do with Jesus!"*

Will you say that? Will you give your heart to Jesus today? If you want this to be the day of your salvation, if you want to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord come forward as we sing and I'll answer your questions and we'll pray together. If you have other decisions to make public such as joining this church come. Come as God leads.

LET US PRAY