



FOCUS ON FAITH

Stephen G. Derges, Elder & Worship Pastor,
Bridgnorth Baptist Church



EASTER SURPRISE

I can hardly believe that this Easter is the fourth anniversary of the start of these articles and the Prayer for the Week. It's been an amazing privilege to share my views on what the Christian faith is all about and it's led to a number of *surprising* outcomes – a series of books, opportunities to speak in different places and most recently, the start of a regular contribution to the website of a Christian radio station.

And over the last four years, forty different people have composed the Prayers of the Week. Many of these people I hardly knew at the start but, *surprisingly*, a number of them have become good friends! I remember Colin Northway, the former editor of the Journal, who initially took the big risk to let us have this opportunity each week, saying that he would be *surprised* if we managed to keep going for six months!

Life's full of *surprises*. As a parent I can still recall the look of amazement on our children's faces opening Christmas or birthday presents and receiving something they hadn't expected. Then there are those unexpected chance meetings or the telephone call from a long lost friend coming as a complete *surprise* out of the blue.

But of course not all *surprises* are pleasant. Bad news often comes as *surprise* too – the loss of a job, the results of a medical examination or accident, a bereavement. Shocks to the system in this way can take years to overcome and sadly many people never recover from an unexpected turn of events.

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On the first Easter Sunday there were *surprises* for a number of people – which changed their lives around.

Two Roman soldiers guarding the tomb of a convicted rebel called Jesus were *surprised*. He'd claimed to be God's Son, stirred up a number of arguments with the religious leaders of the day

and even though He'd really done nothing wrong had been crucified a couple of days earlier. The soldiers were guarding his tomb when they were stunned during a violent earthquake as they came face to face with an angel who rolled away the massive boulder sealing the hastily prepared grave. The Bible Gospel writer, Matthew, says they were so petrified they were shaken rigid – just like dead men.

There was a *surprise* for two women as well. Just after dawn, out of deep love as well as care and concern, they had gone to the tomb where the body had been placed. I'm not going to go into the nuances and details of a Middle Eastern burial of those days, but suffice it to say, their task was to prepare the life-less corpse for formal burial. It had been a rush after the death to find a

temporary resting place before the funeral could take place.

Imagine their amazement to find the tombstone rolled away, an angel sitting on it but no body inside! Then the angel actually speaks to them and gives them the incredulous message that Jesus wasn't dead, He'd risen back to life and that they were to tell the Disciples He'd trained and lived with to meet Him back in His native region of Israel, Galilee. And finally to cap it all, Jesus appears to them and tells them the same thing.

By the way, the angel hadn't gone there to roll away the stone to let Jesus out – the God of creation could have done that Himself. The stone had been rolled away so that the two women – both called Mary – and later the two Disciples Peter and John, could look inside to wonder and worship.

Amazing, astonishing, *surprising*, bewildering, incredible, mind-blowing, miraculous – absolutely, and sadly for many people, unbelievable.

But it is the key tenet of faith we Christians believe in. That Jesus was (and still is) God's Son, that He died in order to reconcile mankind to a loving yet holy God, and that, despite dying the most horrendous death on a cross, He rose again and came back to life.

Some people may wonder why we can believe it. The answer is simple – faith and experience.

Faith – because that's the only way we can start on a journey with God, and experience – because God is always faithful (and often full of *surprises*) to those who commit themselves to Him.

The question is, now that you've read this, can you believe? If the answer is, "*I'm not sure*", why not come along to one of the services the various Christian churches in the area are holding this Easter? You never know you may find it *surprising* and life-changing!

If you are interested in finding out more about God's purposes for your life, log on to www.lifting-jesus-higher.org.uk which provides information on local Churches together with contact details, plus other Christian resources and activities.