

I can't seem to shake this image, so I might as well go with it. It's from a classic movie, one of my all-time favorites, which I'm sure dates me—and maybe says other things about me as well. The Princess Bride has tons of unforgettable characters, memorable lines, and classic scenes. Many of you are already saying things like “Inconceivable” or “As you wish” or “Anybody want a peanut” either silently or aloud, so... You're Welcome. But I have to admit that while it does feature Inigo Montaya, the scene that I have stuck in my mind is NOT one of the more well-known or quotable scenes of the movie.

It's a scene that happens just after the Dread Pirate Robert proves himself to be a better swordsman than Inigo, stronger than Fezzik and smarter than Vezzini. Which serves, among other things, to break up this merry trio of would-be kidnappers. And so Inigo decides to go do what Vezzini told them to do in case they ever got split up, in case their plans got thwarted—to go back to the thieves' forest, **back to where it all began**—and to wait for Vezzini there. And while Vezzini doesn't actually ever show up, Fezzik and Inigo are reunited and embark on their next adventure, since they both have decided to return.

What does this have to do with Easter, you may be asking yourselves and rightly so. Consider this: many of the various Easter stories in the different gospels tell of the disciples being so confused, so distraught after Jesus' death that they simply don't know how to begin moving forward. So instead they decide to go back. In one way or another, they all go back to the beginning, back to what they were used to, back to what they had been doing before they followed Jesus, back to something that seemed familiar, routine, comfortable. Their present has come to a screeching halt, their future looks tattered and torn—and so completely uncertain. And so they are left with no alternative than to return to the past. To fall back on what they do know.

It's human nature, after all. On a certain level, we all crave routine, we are comforted by long-held practices, rituals, patterns, even when life is going pretty well. Sometimes when surprises come our way, when something happens to knock us off our game, and perhaps even more so when tragedy strikes we return to something familiar, perhaps in an attempt to make sense of it all, perhaps simply to go back to a sense, a feeling, the “old normal” we had become used to before this new thing occurred. This returning to something more familiar, this falling back on our old routines is all over the Easter narratives in the gospels. Jesus has died, the disciples have scattered, but they eventually meet up in the upper room, the same place where they shared the Last Supper. And in what must have been some awkward silences and poor attempts at conversation, Peter suddenly announces, “I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm going fishing.” And we're told in John 21 that at least some of the disciples join him—maybe just the fishermen, but maybe more than that. Yeah, fishing. We know fishing. We like fishing. Let's go fishing. Like we used to. They return to their previous life—to the old routine.

Or what about the other two disciples, who decide to start walking to their home in Emmaus. We didn't read this story this morning, but it's the one that follows directly

where we left off in the gospel of Luke. After Jesus' crucifixion, just after the women shared their news of an empty tomb—only to be told it was utter nonsense, an idle tale—these two begin walking on the road to Emmaus, back home, back to the life they once knew before they started following Jesus. They are described first as being sad, then foolish, not able to recognize Jesus walking alongside them. They describe the events they've been part of, wondering out loud where it all went wrong. Finally, they reach the place they've been heading, they arrive home, and invite Jesus to join them—still not knowing it is Jesus.

And of course, there are the women we heard about in the gospel reading we read this morning. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James and at least a couple more women. These women have each been called, healed, and taught by Jesus. They are disciples in their own right, part of the group of over 100 Jesus' constant followers mentioned in Luke. Elsewhere these women are described as having assisted Jesus and his movement financially. Their world has been shaken, turned upside down as well. And so they fall back on what they know, they return to convention and tradition. They bring perfume and spices to the tomb, as was the custom for loved ones to do at the time of death. They had rushed to get the body in the tomb before the Sabbath came and now are going to finish what they started. But it seems to me that they also do this, at least in part because they are just looking for something, *anything* to do. They are hoping to feel useful by completing the burial rite. Kind of like what we do when we bring a casserole over to someone who has suffered a loss. Of course this hotdish, this act of kindness is appreciated as a thoughtful and practical gift by those who receive it. But let's be honest, it also gives the one who *brings* it a sense of purpose—a sense of being useful and helpful, and quite simply give them something to DO when they don't know what else to do or say. I suspect that's a bit how these women feel. They've returned to convention, to what they know, to what their culture dictates. They went back to a way of being that they used to know.

But in each instance, in each of these examples, as Jesus' followers went back to their familiar routines, once they got there, they were **surprised**, utterly surprised, by what God had in store for them next. Peter and the gang who was fishing—they are surprised by the risen Christ who meets them at the shore of the lake, gives them fishing advice for crying out loud, and then cooks them breakfast. Talk about surprise! But the bigger surprise is still to come, as he forgives their denial, forgives their running away, calls them all over again saying, "Follow me." Talk about upsetting their expectations. Talk about breaking through this attempt to return to something more familiar. Talk about Jesus—once again—making all things new.

The two disciples walking to Emmaus, were surprised when they recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread. At that moment of surprise, suddenly, looking back on their walk together it all made sense. Their hearts were burning within them as Jesus opened their eyes to what the scriptures said. Returning, they thought, to the comfort of home after an abrupt and terrifying end to the Jesus movement, they realized that Jesus was still with them, or with them again, or something else altogether, and they leapt to their feet and ran back to tell the other disciples. Talk about surprise. Talk about rejuvenation, regeneration. Talk about resurrection and new life.

And the women taking the spices to the tomb in today's gospel? They are surprised to find the stone rolled away, even more surprised to find the tomb is empty, and downright startled by the two men who seem to appear out of nowhere and ask them: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" What a great question—one that even in its asking jars them to return to what Jesus has said. Truth be told, they didn't realize they *were* seeking the living among the dead. They were actually seeking the dead where the dead ought to be, in the tomb, in need of spices and perfumes, sealing the deal, sealing the tomb. But surprise!—the two men tell the women that Jesus is not there, but has risen. They tell them to remember, to remember what he told them about everything he would go through, remember his promise made to you and to others. Remember how you were called in the first place, remember why you followed Jesus throughout his ministry. Remember, remember, remember, they say. Remember, and stop seeking the dead among the living. Do not choose to stay with what you know, what seems more familiar, more comfortable, safer, do not cling to those things that seem so prone to becoming *better* in your personal memories than they ever were in real life. The words of these messengers who meet the women at the tomb challenge them—and if we let them, they challenge us—to stop hanging on to what is dead and gone and move into new life. Surprise!

Actually, we shouldn't be surprised. As ironic as this next thought will be, we ought not be surprised by all the surprises God has for us, and for all those who follow Jesus. Among the many attributes we could give to God, our God is a surprising God. A God of fresh starts and new beginnings. A God of reversals. A God who lifts up the lowly and brings down those who have thought too highly of themselves. A God who makes a way where there is no way, who breathes life into dead, dry bones, who brings liberation and freedom, who shepherds us from death into life.

We hear it again and again in the stories we tell, in the passages we read from God's word. The Lost are found. The Last are made first. The Least are welcomed, loved, accepted as they are, celebrated even, and told their lives matter. The building block that was rejected has become the cornerstone of a whole new world. The idle tale of a handful of women as become the central proclamation of our faith. And death, the last enemy, has itself been destroyed, swallowed up whole. New life is ours in the risen and living lord Jesus.

Today I invite you to be surprised and amazed by what God is still doing through the risen Christ. Breaking our routines. Confounding our expectations. Turning our sorrow into joy. Bringing new life in the midst of death. Being revealed in the breaking of bread. The living God, the risen Christ continues to call us—as often as not through *very* unexpected messengers—to move beyond that which we find familiar to a whole new life. A life of newness and wholeness. A life of community and acceptance. A life of calling and purpose. A life of joy, wonder, and surprise.

Why seek the living among the dead? Be surprised. Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen, indeed.

Alleluia! Amen.