

Surprised by Life
John 18:1-20
March 23, 2008 (Easter)
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
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Peter Larson tells a great Easter story which I'd like to share with you on this very special day in the life of our church. When Peter was 6, his uncle gave an Easter duckling to him and his brothers. His parents politely let them accept the gift, assuming it would die in a week and that would be the end of it.

The duckling was a yellow ball of fuzz with webfeet. They put it in a washtub full of water and watched it swim in circles...a toy that did not need batteries. It was cute, all lively and bright, like a picture-perfect Easter morning. And it was a picture-perfect day...sunny, not too hot, with flowers blooming and the world bursting with new things.

But, unlike Easter morning, the duck did not go away. It just got bigger and bigger. Soon they moved it from a cardboard box to a chicken-wire pen that their dad built in the basement. They still put it in the washtub each day, although it had less and less room to swim. Then the duck started biting. By now its feathers were white, and it had developed a very loud quack. When it swam in the washtub, the duck kicked water across the room with its powerful webbed feet. And despite their best efforts to clean the newspaper in the pen, the duck smelled bad.

In short, the Easter duck was a pain. It had outlived its sunny usefulness and refused to die or disappear. It's somewhat like the story of the ugly duckling, only reversed. The cute duckling that everyone wanted grew up to be a nasty obnoxious duck that everyone wished would go away. Or, to be more honest, the duck was simply being a duck, trapped in a suburban basement.

The problem with the Easter duck was that it was alive, and life makes its own plans. Life grows and changes. It wants things, needs things. Life makes demands and often bites the hand that feeds it. Isn't this a part of the problem with Easter? The power of Easter is the power of new beginnings and new life. Ash Wednesday and Good Friday are only the introduction to a story that opens with the Resurrection. And we're not sure we are ready for Easter any more than we are ready for someone to give our children an Easter duckling.

Are you ready for Easter? Are you ready for new life, for all the changes this event can mean for you? Are you prepared to admit that you don't have the control over your life and others that you thought you had? There is a huge difference between the common cultural view of Easter with bunnies, chicks, and ducklings, and the reality of Christ's resurrection power to change your life! What are you here to celebrate this morning....Easter baskets or real new life? What would it mean for Easter to be real in our lives?

A good place to start would be to back up a couple of days to Good Friday when Jesus was crucified on the cross. After his agonizing death there was the darkness of the tomb. What are the parts of your life that are dead or dying? Maybe it's our marriage that is on life support, or a difficult relationship with a family member that never seems to get better. Perhaps our way of criticizing and judging others means that people don't want to be around us. Maybe it's our tendency to always look on the dark side of life. We just find it hard to feel the joy.

The first step to realizing the power of the resurrection is to do a realistic assessment of the dead and dying parts of our lives. The next step is to determine if we really want new life to spring forth. This is a critical step because in a weird kind of way, sometimes we actually like being dead. We become so comfortable with the dysfunctional pieces of our lives, the parts that

aren't working well, the unhealthy parts, that we don't want to change. We fear the transformation that new life and healing would bring. We are afraid of new life.

So we must truly figure out how much we want to be saved from our sin. We must get in touch with our desire to be made whole. We must spend time thinking about how badly we want to be changed from the inside out. The reason we need to do this spiritual work is because new life in Christ is not easy. It's not easy to be surprised by new life. It's not easy to walk with Christ. When offered the prospect of new life and a fresh start, we shy away. We are afraid that new life will get out of hand, and bite and have a loud voice. It might be too embarrassing or worse, too demanding. To open up too much of our lives to the Easter power of God is too risky. It might take us places we're not prepared to go.

Parenting is one journey many people are not prepared to make. My wife, Kim and I are at the end of raising our four children. As I think back on this parenting experience I have to say that it has been an emotional roller coaster. The highs have been incredible. As children when Lauren or Ryan laughed and enjoyed life, the sun rose. When Jeremy or Jenny hugged me, I felt I was the most loved person in the world. The lows have been equally dramatic. I wondered when our kids would stop the bickering and complaining. Sometimes I felt guilty when I became angry with them. Parenting has been the hardest strain in my marriage. This new life named Jenny, Ryan, Lauren, and Jeremy has overwhelmed me. I have never been more stressed. I have never been happier.

And I would not have it any other way. My children are not here to fit my needs, to be cute on demand, and to disappear when I am tired. They are growing, changing, giving, and demanding according to their own schedules. And they have led me...sometimes dragging, sometimes skipping...into that new life with them.

As a child in the White House, Alice Roosevelt Longworth shocked Washington society by her antics. Once, a visitor objected to Alice's wandering in and out of the president's office as the visitor discussed important national business with Alice's father, Theodore. The president responded, "I can be president of the United States or I can control Alice. I cannot possibly do both."

Many of you are parents of toddlers. You already know about the surprises this new life brings to your family. Here's a list of toddler truths.

1. If I like it, it's mine.
2. If it's in my hand, it's mine.
3. If I can take it from you, it's mine.
4. If I had it a little while ago, it's mine.
5. If it's mine, it must never appear to be yours in any way.
6. If I'm doing or building something, all the pieces are mine.
7. If it looks just like mine, it's mine.
8. If I saw it first, it's mine.
9. If you are playing with something and you put it down, it automatically becomes mine.
10. If it's broken, it's yours.

A dad was in a store with a screaming child in his cart. He was embarrassed and utterly helpless in controlling his toddler's tantrum. People were looking at him, making matters worse. Finally one shopper overheard the dad saying, "It's okay, Luke. It's okay. Everything's going to be alright, Luke. Be calm, Luke." This shopper said to the dad, "I have to say that you are doing a remarkable job trying to calm little Luke here." "Lady," the dad said, "His name is not Luke. I'm Luke!"

New life can take many forms: a child, a job, a home, an inner peace, a death, a divorce, a friendship, even a duck. We are experiencing new life here at St. John United Methodist Church. I want us to go back for a moment to an earlier time in St. John's history. Let's go back to the 1960's

when folks worshipped in the St. Matthew wing. It really must have been a close-knit family of faith...cozy and comfortable...everyone knowing everyone else. I suppose you could say it was a lot like an Easter duckling...warm, fuzzy, and cute.

But the duck grew up. New people wanted to be a part of this new life and those early St. John members were faced with a decision. Should they make more changes to grow or should they try to thwart the growth and hold on to their close-knit fellowship? We all know their decision. They stepped out on faith to build new space to include those new folks. To not change to welcome and include new folks would be like trying to keep an adult duck confined to a cage. The problem is that we are not a cute little duck anymore. Like the duck we are growing and we will continue to grow. What changes do we need to make in order to be a welcoming family for the new folks who want to be a part of this new life in Christ? This newness of life is here, not as that which would change our past, but one which would make whole our present, and offer hope for our future!

For those who may be here for the first time I invite you to be a part of this community of faith as we seek to live as Easter people in a Good Friday world. At Easter we celebrate the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. Fortunately for the likes of you and me, God does not ask if we have enough energy or time for rebirth. It is a gift to know that new life will move ahead whether we are ready or not, and that we need not make it happen.

Back to the Easter duck story. When summer came Peter and his family took the duck, who was fully grown, to a farm. Right up to the last the duck was a pain...biting, flapping, and quacking as they bundled it into the back of the station wagon. In the barnyard they opened the rear door of the car. The duck was out like a shot. It never looked back, never turned to say thanks. With a high-speed waddle that would have made an Olympic race walker proud, the duck rounded the corner of the barn and disappeared.

The surprise of new life in Christ often comes when we least expect it. God invites you out of the darkness and into the light. It is a journey of faith. It is not easy. And sometimes it hurts. But its rewards are out of this world. May God grant you an Easter that is a beginning of new life, an Easter that refuses to go away.