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Sometimes the unexpected happens. Think of all the times when you find yourself surprised by an event, by something that occurs when you least expect it. A friend sends you a note thanking you for something you did that you didn't realize had made an impact. Or someone from many years ago finds you on Facebook and sends a message inviting you to reconnect and catch up on all the missing years. I had two such unexpected connections this past week, surprising encounters with friends from the past.

As I was sitting at my desk reading email, Scott, Elliot, one of our former Eden Seminary student interns here at Crossroads, sent me a message about possible changes in his life. That led to my reply with an invitation for us to chat by phone to catch up, which led to the two of us setting time next week to talk more in depth. A surprising unexpected encounter.

A few days later another email arrived from a member of Owensboro First Christian Church where I had served as associate minister before I moved to

Illinois. She included an attachment of a picture of their sanctuary, which burned to the ground last week due to a lightning strike. She also wrote about how her connection to the church has helped her through the healing process of a traumatic event in her life, and then she thanked me for my role in encouraging her to become part of the church many years ago. Another unexpected surprising encounter.

You just never know when you might experience something unexpected, such as shrimp in Illinois or oysters in Indiana. These landlocked states are probably not the first places you would expect to encounter fresh saltwater creatures, but in a lab at Purdue University in Indiana, you could encounter three large tanks of salt water filled with oysters. Why oysters? Because they do something no one has been able to figure out how they do it: they create a strong waterproof glue to attach themselves to rocks. Researchers hope to crack their secret, creating a glue that could be used for

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underwater repairs.¹ Who would expect to find oysters in Indiana?

Raising shrimp in Illinois seems just as unexpected, but in a shed behind a farm house in central Illinois, four above-ground swimming pools filled with salt water each contain 4000 shrimp. Why shrimp in Illinois? Because they taste wonderful! No worry about oil spills or pollution there—just delicious shrimp, which taste better than those shipped from other places in the world.² Not something one would expect to encounter in Illinois!

I imagine the women who went to visit the tomb early on Sunday morning 2000 years ago were even more surprised at their unexpected encounter. They had taken spices to anoint Jesus' body after his death. They expected to find a tomb sealed with a large stone that someone would have to help them move, but when they arrived they instead found a rolling stone (play audio clip³)—that would be a surprising encounter, but that's not the kind of rolling stone they encountered! I'm sure their eyes

were filled with tears that go by, but instead of a musical kind of rolling stone they encountered the stone that had already been rolled away from the entrance of the tomb. Looking inside they found it empty—more unexpected than hearing a band of Rolling Stones erupt into music.

And if this wasn't enough of surprising encounter, two men wearing dazzling white clothes asked the terrified women, "Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here, but raised up."⁴

Finding shrimp or oysters in a Midwestern state might be unexpected, or even hearing Rolling Stones music may come as a surprise, but finding a body missing and then hearing it has been raised is even more unexpected!

Suddenly all the teachings of Jesus began to make sense—for the women visiting the tomb recalled all the stories about death and new life. "Remember when he told the story about how you have to plant a seed in the ground and how it looks dead? Remember how he said that it would sprout

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new life in the spring? The story is just like him being in the tomb dead, but now somehow he has new life!”

“Yes, and remember how he talked about the temple being destroyed and in three days it would be rebuilt? We all thought he was referring to the temple in Jerusalem. He sounded crazy! He wasn’t talking about a building; he was talking about himself! It all seems so clear now. Let’s go and tell the other disciples what we have discovered!”

What response did the women receive? Luke’s Gospel tells us no one believed them; the others thought the women were making it all up. Peter even jumped into action and ran to the tomb, peeked inside and found it empty, except for a few grave clothes. I’m not sure what he expected to see, but he walked away puzzled and shaking his head in confusion.

Oftentimes when we encounter those unexpected occurrences we may find ourselves not believing what happened. We may even walk away shaking our own heads, confused by what just

happened. You may find it hard to believe that someone offers you forgiveness in the face of the unkind words you have spoken. Or you may find it just as unexpected when someone tells you years later that she found hope through the listening ear you offered.

Lillian Daniel wrote a recent book, *When “Spiritual But Not Religious” Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*. She tells of a man who proclaimed to her that he was spiritual but no longer attended church, then explained the many reasons he has given up on religion and finds God in his own way. He could see God in rainbows and nature, but then he admitted that he couldn’t make sense of the suffering and pain in the world.

It’s in the community of faith, the author suggests, that we struggle together with the difficult aspects of life, listening to thousands of years of church tradition, asking questions, searching together for meaning. She suggests

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There's a community of faith who, over thousands of years, have followed a man who was not lucky, who, in the scheme of luck, was decidedly unlucky. But in the scheme of the church he was willing to die alongside the unlucky, to be raised from the dead, and to point out in that action that there is much more to life than you could possibly come up with. And as for the resurrection, try doing that yourself.⁵

In other words, we can't do it all alone. We need God and one another. Sometimes we need to hear this Easter news again and again, even in surprising and unexpected ways that remind us that the

resurrection still happens in our lives and in today's world. ([Play video](#)⁶)

Those of us sitting here on this Easter Sunday know that no one in the church is perfect—we all make mistakes, we all ask the difficult questions, we all face struggles that seem unbearable, we all encounter stones that seem too difficult to move, but the Easter story reminds us that no matter how difficult the challenge, God proclaims that hope exists, that new life is possible, not just when we die, but here in this life as well. Christ has risen! Together we celebrate that God still offers unexpected surprises—and who continues to still roll away the stones. Alleluia!

¹ Joe Palca, "Why A Hoosier State Scientist Is Stuck On Oysters," March 28, 2013, www.npr.org/2013/03/28/175550939/why-a-hoosier-state-scientist-is-stuck-on-oysters

² Daniel Hajek, "Landlocked Midwest Farmers Raise Saltwater Shrimp," March 27, 2013, www.npr.org/2013/03/27/175438949/landlocked-midwest-farmers-raise-saltwater-shrimp

³ "As Tears Go By" Rolling Stones.

⁴ Peterson, E. H. (2005). *The Message: The Bible in contemporary language* (Lk 24:5-6). Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress

⁵ Lillian Daniel, *When "Spiritual But Not Religious" Is Not Enough: Seeing God in Surprising Places, Even the Church*, Jericho Books, 2013, p. 14.

⁶The Easter Story from *The Voice*, www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=vNOulGneGQc. See also www.hearthevoice.com/