

April 12, 2020 (Easter Sunday) | Sanctuary worship

TEXT: [I Corinthians 15:51](#); [I Timothy 3:16](#)

TITLE: **An Easter Mystery**

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Prayer for Illumination:

Almighty God, by the power of your Spirit roll away every stone that keeps us from hearing your word, trusting your will, and walking humbly beside you in faith; in the name of the risen Christ. Amen.

[I Corinthians 15:51](#) – Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed.

[Psalm 118:23](#) – This is the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes.

[I Timothy 3:16](#) – Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: [Christ] was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.

Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great. It is marvelous in our eyes. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed.

It’s Easter! Gather around. I’m going to deliver a sermon about Jesus Christ being raised from the dead. Yes, a sermon—don’t look at me that way; I promise it’s a good one. (A crowd gathers so I begin.) I’m going to tell you about Jesus’ resurrection from the dead and explain scientifically how it occurred. (Some people look intrigued but others frown because they know it’s impossible to explain a true resurrection from the dead scientifically – so they turn to walk away.) Wait—tell you what—I’m going to tell you the story of our faith, the story of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter morning. (Some pause, but others now shake their heads; because stories are for kids and may be entertaining but aren’t necessarily true.) Wait, wait – this is even better. Listen! I will tell you a mystery—an Easter mystery. (Now people are intrigued and they draw closer. Everyone loves mysteries: Sherlock Holmes, Agatha Christie. And everyone loves it when mysteries are solved. Explain about the Bermuda Triangle, or what happened to Jimmy Hoffa, or what in the world is this fascination with the Tiger King?)

So that’s the start of my Easter sermon: “Listen, I will tell you a mystery.” To help me with this sermon, I opened up two heavy bible commentaries and looked up their definition of a mystery. And, Scout’s honor, this is what they said: “*A mystery is a piece of hidden knowledge about God’s preordained purposes now disclosed through revelation (see Romans 11:25 and I Corinthians 2:7, as well as Romans 16, I Corinthians 4, Ephesians 3, and Colossians 1).*”¹ Not only was that confusing, it was wrong. At least, it was the wrong way to go about an Easter sermon. Mysteries are not hidden knowledge revealed by revelation. Mysteries aren’t knowledge; they aren’t about solving the Murder on the Orient Express. Mysteries are things that go beyond words—that go deeper than knowledge. They are things that we experience and that change us—hopefully for the better. That’s what Paul was talking about in I Corinthians.

I'm a big fan of Karen Armstrong's writings. While I was on sabbatical, I read her latest book "The Lost Art of Scripture." That's a good one, as is her earlier book, "The Case for God." Anyway, Armstrong has said that if we want to talk about mysteries, we need to go back to the original Greek word, which is *musterion*. A "musterion" is not some kind of hazy, irrational problem waiting to be solved. It is an experience—an insight that comes to us through an action, like a ritual or a sacrament. Let me unpack this a bit.

Think of things you've experienced that when you remember them later, you can see where you were and feel again what that moment was like. One of the most impressive cathedrals I've ever visited is the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona. To visit this cathedral, you're given an audio tour—something you listen to through headsets. It tells you about Antoni Gaudí, the church's visionary architect. It describes the carvings over the doorway you're about to enter and how Gaudí put the bible stories on the outside of the building for all to see. But once you walk into the church—once you see the tall, tree-like columns stretching up to a white, arched ceiling, and see the colored light stream in through the abstract stained-glass windows on the side walls—the tour commentator is wise enough to shut up. The audio guide simply plays some quiet music and lets you walk in, look around, and experience the space without filling your head with facts and figures and details. To this day when I re-live that experience, it is something I feel viscerally even as I picture in my mind the beauty of that space.

I'm sure you have had similar moments in your own life. Maybe it was an awe-inspiring city you visited, or standing beneath a starry night in a place without light clutter, or looking down from the rim of the Grand Canyon at sunset. These are the experiences we associate with "musterion"—mystery beyond the limits of language; mystery that moves into the realm of the sacred; mystery that is at the heart of our Christian faith.

Faith is mysterious—not because it is hard to understand, but because it is meant to engage with you on a level deeper than mere words. Think about prayer. Joseph Campbell once said "prayer is relating to and meditating on a mystery."² Think about baptism. We pour water on someone's head. Superficially it is a brief moment of quiet focus and wet water. But wrapped up with the act are concepts about washing away sin, re-birth through life-giving water, and initiation into a Christian family that stretches around the globe. And every time we wash ourselves or splash water on our faces, it is possible to remember we belong to a family of faith, and we re-live our baptism in ways that are hard to put into words.

Think about communion. We re-tell a story about a meal in which Jesus was the host. We eat a small piece of bread and sip a cup of juice or wine. But wrapped around that act is a spirit of deep connection to others, a sense of feeding of our needs that goes beyond mere digestion, and a stepping away from self-focus so we can step into something holy, wonderful, and impossible to describe.

Our faith comes alive because of mystery. The mystery of the Trinity—that dance between thinking of God as One, holy and eternal, and God as Three, incarnate, active both at creation and at the end of all time. The mystery of scripture—its Old Testament

stories about a rescue from slavery in Egypt and a promised liberation for all held in any form of captivity; its New Testament words of Jesus saying “not a single sparrow shall fall to the ground apart from the Father’s knowledge.”³ We wonder how all this is possible, even as we sense deep inside that, yes, it truly is so.

And perhaps the greatest of them all, think about the mystery of Easter—Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. It is something described but never explained. Christ is seen in the garden by Mary Magdalene, but he told her not to hold onto him. Christ walked beside two disciples on the road to Emmaus, but is unrecognized by them until he broke bread. Christ appeared in the Upper Room behind locked doors, yet doesn’t stay long. Later Christ called from the seashore out to the fishing disciples, so that they might eat a meal together once more and be told to “feed my sheep.” It is a mystery—a “mysterion” that is not to be explained, but something we are invited to ponder and experience and live into through ritual moments like these: moments like feeling the splash of baptism water or tasting a communion meal of bread and wine; moments like this Easter morning worship, set apart from all other days to hear once more about Christ’s resurrection; moments when we are invited to hold onto the words of scripture, daring to understand them deeply as they sink in and comfort us and fill us with peace.

Paul, the psalmist, and Timothy each chose to break the silence and put into words that which is almost too wonderful for words. They did this so that we might trust in the assurance of new life given to us this day by an eternal God, a redeeming Holy Spirit, and yes, by a resurrected Christ. *Listen, I will tell you a mystery. We will not all die, but we will all be changed. It is marvelous in our eyes. Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great.* Thanks be to God!

¹ Richard B. Hays, Interpretation commentary, First Corinthians, John Knox Press, 1997, p. 274

² Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth, p. 209

³ Matthew 10:29-30