Thank you for being here today! Your choosing to come and celebrate Easter here with us certainly adds joy to this Easter. Thank you! No matter what brought you, or what you are expecting, I am sure you are right where God wants you to be right now, and that God wants to give you an unexpected gift.

As the two disciples on the road to Emmaus were walking along, heart broken, their hopes shattered, they probably thought that the best they could expect from the stranger who joined them would be to have someone with whom they could commiserate. But even that hope was dashed when they started talking with the stranger, and he asked “What sort of things happened in Jerusalem?”

Once they got past his seeming unfamiliarity with what was so earthshattering to them, imagine the beginning wonderment: how can he now connecting all of this to scripture? Who is this fellow? What began as a mini-surprise soon turned out to be a breathtaking surprise. It’s Jesus himself! Risen from the dead!!

This is a vital piece of the Christian journey. I’ve certainly experienced breathtaking, God-moment surprises, life and death surprises like the ones we celebrate today. I hope you have too. At times I’ve gone to visit someone in the hospital, and came home certain that the next call would be from the funeral home. Seeing someone you were sure wouldn’t live through the day come up in the communion line weeks later – certainly took my breath away! Or at times the opposite outcome equally surprised me by joy. Going to see someone in hospice, expecting to be depressed, and finding that the person facing death has a serenity, a peace, a sense of readiness to go home and a trust in God that is truly breathtaking. Then there is visiting a family that has kept vigil, and who have just lost a dearest loved one. Expecting grief, but finding them celebrating the end of a long journey, filled with stories, laughter, and an amazing peace – a surprising gift of grace.

Throughout the Bible, the writers, inspired by God, help us to see how God operates. How God brings hope into the most unlikely, unexpected places, in amazing ways. John’s Gospel alone is filled with surprises! John described the crucifixion, a scene which should be laden with the ultimate disappointment, yet he sees Jesus being lifted up like the bronze serpent in the desert during the days of Moses. He sees it as Jesus being glorified, an icon of mercy and healing, not shame! Perhaps you haven’t spent lots of time looking at the Crucifix, praying about it, and seeing perfect love offered through sacrifice the way John did. Coming to see the Crucifix as it is meant to be – a powerful sign of the greatest love – that would certainly be a priceless gift!

Just a couple of weeks ago, Jesus taught us through John’s Gospel that unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. In the same way, the little deaths we experience can be the seed falling to the ground, so that new life will emerge. Perhaps you came
today without expecting anything to engage what is happening in your life these days. I hope and pray that just hearing and thinking about the seed falling to the ground, and bursting forth as a new plant, a fruitful one at that, will make you think about your own life. Has some part, something in you kind of died? Is it possible that God plans to water it, send warmth and sun, and cause something to come to new life in you? God wants to surprise us all with joy!

When we truly encounter Jesus, amazing things can happen. Unexpected. Life-changing. Encountering Jesus, we can discover we have been blind to many things going on around us. To all manner of spiritual realities. Let Jesus lead us, and he will open our eyes, often when we least expect it. Jesus opens up whole new worlds for us.

Not even death is predictable with Jesus. Let me repeat that. Not even death is predictable with Jesus. Rather than a dead end, death becomes a doorway into new life.

So again, if you are here because something drew you, there is just a bit of spiritual thirst going on, some hunger for deeper meaning in life, and you thought you might check our parish out: I hope and pray the Lord starts speaking to you. I hope you experience a life changing encounter with Jesus. Even if it is just one word, or phrase, or image, I pray a conversation will begin.

If you are here often, and have celebrated Easter for decades, you may think you are past being surprised. Perfect. The folks in our Easter readings all thought the time for any joy and surprises was long past. I hope you witness something you never noticed before. A prayer you never heard quite that way before. A song. A gesture. Maybe watching one other person praying will inspire you. I pray something will hit a deep chord. I hope and pray lots of eyes and ears are opened a bit wider this glorious Easter Sunday.

If your faith has been suffering a bit, almost dying, because of heavy burdens you have been carrying, sorrows, deep disappointments, hardships:  I hope and pray your surprise may be Jesus coaxing life out of a seed that has fallen to the ground and died. Soak in the spring rain. Let that shell, that protective seed coat break open. Let a little sprout of hope emerge, and send down roots. Reach for the sun, for God’s Son! Jesus does things in unexpected ways here, and it could well happen this morning.

Jesus offers forgiveness and peace, comfort to those who are grieving, strength to those who are weary, hope to those who have almost lost it. Some gift for everyone, based on what we really need.

While, at the surface level, those on the road to Emmaus were walking away from Jerusalem in deep sadness, I get the sense that deep down, way deep down, there was a spark of hope, a prayer even. “Lord, you spoke to us so powerfully about the future. About God’s reign breaking into this messed up world. How could it end this way? You taught us so much about second chances, about holding on to hope, about the wonders God can do each and every day. You showed us that miracles are real. Please, we need a miracle right now!”
The miracle that unfolded was far beyond their wildest hopes. It is a miracle available to us each time we come to Mass. Jesus truly rose, is glorified, and is present among us. He is with us in the breaking of the bread. The communion we share with him is not a friendship that will end at the end of our life on this earth. It is a friendship that will carry us into eternity.

Take a look beyond the surface of your life today. What are some of your deepest hopes? The Lord wants to take us there, far beyond the meager surface hopes and desires where we sometimes stay stuck. He wants us all to discover that a tomb where some part of ourselves may be buried, some hope lost, some dream blocked off isn’t meant to remain sealed! The Lord can roll back the stone. He can open the scriptures for us. Open them so we discover how, just as Jesus was part of the life of those we read about in the Bible, he can be a living part of our life.

I am really glad you are here today, and glad to be with you this Easter morn. May God bless you this Easter, and always. May we all experience his love for us, his presence in the breaking of the bread. May we come to better understand the Scriptures. May we discover that through his resurrection for the dead, Jesus can come to life in us, and we in him. The Lord is truly risen. Alleluia!!