

What a Wonder-Filled Morning!

“Expect the unexpected.” This little quote has been adopted and paraphrased by countless people over the years. Most famously, playwright Oscar Wilde said, “To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect.” A modern mind will naturally be prepared for anything and everything to happen. We’ve all learned that life is full of surprises.

You probably came here this morning with some preset expectations. There would probably be a lot of people in church. You were eager for a good breakfast (and I hope it met your expectations). You were looking forward to singing some of your favorite Easter hymns. The church would be decorated with beautiful flowers. And best of all, you could be certain we’d talk about Jesus rising from the dead.

For us, the resurrection has come to be expected. But for the first visitors to the tomb on Easter morning, the events were completely unexpected. It was a commotion of one thing after another that they couldn’t have predicted that left them wondering what was going on. It was a wonder-filled morning, and to this day, it still fills us with awe.

The Gospel of Luke before us this morning records the resurrection fairly quickly and in a straightforward fashion. Here’s the facts: There was a group of women who had prepared aromatic spices to dress Jesus’ body for burial. They had watched where he was buried on Friday afternoon, so they knew where they were headed. They also knew that a large stone had been rolled in front of the grave. Jesus’ body lay in a tomb carved into the side of a hill. Or at least that’s where these women *thought* Jesus was.

They made their way out to the tomb very early in the morning, only to find that the stone was rolled away. Now, this alone would be enough to startle loved ones going to a friend’s grave. Imagine if you walked to your loved one’s headstone in the cemetery or to their crypt in the mausoleum. Maybe you’ve walked that path day after day for years. Maybe they were only recently laid to rest, but you still know the way; you’ll never forget where they are. But what if you got there only to find a hole in the ground, a gaping spot in the wall, and no body to be found? The women were perplexed and filled with wonder: Where was Jesus?

While they were wondering, all of a sudden there were two men in lightning-bright, gleaming robes. These angels from the Lord came to relay the good news. Okay, it’s still before daylight, these ladies are alone in a tomb, and there’s a couple of blinding-white men suddenly standing near them. I’d be frightened too! The holiness of these angels caused the women to bow down to the ground.

It’s easy for us to be afraid when we’re disoriented. When life has us shaken and all out of sorts, our darker thoughts creep in and try to have the loudest voice. We want to hide our faces from these nagging thoughts. Maybe our fear comes from realizing that death is lurking around the corner, and we know we have to face the holy God, the Judge of all. If those women cowered before two angels, how would we react before the absolute perfection of our Creator? When we’re wondering what’s going to happen to us, the accusations and guilt that lurk in our hearts convince us that we’re bound for eternal death in hell.

Those angels quickly dispelled the women’s confusion. Jesus’ friends might not have expected his resurrection that Sunday morning, but these messengers served as a reminder of what Jesus said. They asked, “Why do you look for the living among the dead?” In other words, “Why would you expect to find a living person in a tomb, where dead people are? A better question, why do you think that Jesus is still dead? He’s not here! He has risen! Don’t you remember what he told you while he was with you before? The Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinners, be crucified, and on the third day be raised again.”

Jesus had told his friends all of this beforehand over and over. It was God’s plan for Jesus to be betrayed, to suffer and die, AND to rise again on the third day. Why couldn’t they remember? Perhaps when Jesus made these predictions, his followers were too caught up in the fact that he said he’d suffer and die. “No, Jesus! Certainly not! We won’t let you die!” Maybe the grief from the events of the previous days overwhelmed any faith they had in his resurrection. They were still wondering what would happen to their group without their leader. It could just be that they were holding onto what they knew about dead people. Once you’ve died, you’re dead. You just don’t come back to life.

But with this reminder from the angels, the women were excited. Filled with awe at what had happened, they hurried back to tell the disciples who were in hiding. The ladies reported everything they'd experienced at the tomb, but the men didn't believe them. To these disciples, the women's words seemed like nonsense, idle talk, a whole bunch of baloney. Were they blinded by their grief and fear? Did they simply not trust the witness of women? Were they sticking to their idea that "dead is dead"? They hadn't come to expect the unexpected - even after three years of seeing miracles and hearing wonderful teaching from Jesus?

One disciple, Peter, did get up and run to the tomb. John's Gospel records that another disciple went with him, likely John himself. When they investigated the tomb, they found things just as the women said: the stone was rolled away, there was no body, only the graveclothes, lying tidily in the grave. Still, Peter went away from that grave wondering what had happened. What rational explanation could there be for this empty tomb? Where was their friend who had died?

We have the benefit of being centuries removed from these events. We have a lengthy record of the witnesses' reports. We have the whole New Testament, the teachings of a Church built on the foundation of a risen Lord. We have all these believers who have gone before us and trusted what Jesus said. So, why do we still sometimes wonder about these events?

The devil likes to turn our curiosity and confusion into doubt. Such rational, modern minds shouldn't accept a resurrection. This life is all there is, and then you're gone. What should the human mind expect when we die? Nothing more. Already that first Easter, people were concocting an explanation for where the body went - oh, his friends must have stolen him during the night! Even though the soldiers on guard felt the earthquake and saw the angel who rolled the stone away. But our brains want a rational explanation for these unexpected phenomena.

Maybe our doubt comes from hearts clouded by grief and fear. The hurt we've experienced in this life makes it challenging for us to believe in a God who conquers death. How many of you have seen someone who's been dead and buried come back to life? It just doesn't happen in our experience. And the pain of this world convinces us that our reality is filled with sadness, bitterness, despair. If someone came running to share the Easter story with us the first time, we might think they were a bit

delirious too. What do you mean, the stone was already rolled away and Jesus' body was gone? And you saw angels? And the women claimed they saw Jesus himself? It's all too much. It's all too good to be true.

Even for those of us who have celebrated Easter every year for our whole lives, this morning can still be filled with wonder. But thanks be to God, our wonder becomes an eager curiosity to hear the amazing news again. We're filled with excitement to be convinced of this truth. Those women and the disciples needed reminders, multiple appearances, and repeated testimonies before they believed. Our hurting hearts and clouded minds can always use another jolt of Easter joy. How good for us to hear again that Jesus is not in the tomb! He has risen, just as he said!

Let's go back to our opening quote: "Expect the unexpected." The most ancient reference comes from a Greek philosopher named Heraclitus. He said, "If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it, for it is hard to be sought out and difficult." Indeed, the truth of Easter doesn't come easily. We wouldn't stumble upon it by seeking it out on our own. The human mind certainly doesn't expect this to be real. But we rejoice that we've learned to expect the unexpected. We find great comfort in this radical truth.

What does this unexpected reality mean for us? It changes what we expect to happen at the end of our lives. Because Jesus lives, we also will live again. The Son of Man was indeed delivered over to the hands of sinners and was crucified. But Jesus didn't stay dead on that cross. We have an empty cross at the front of our church as a reminder that Christ wasn't defeated. After the empty cross came the empty tombs. Three days after he was buried, Jesus came out of his grave to prove that death doesn't have any power over the almighty God. Death has been swallowed up in victory! Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Jesus Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, and the apostle Paul says that Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

We can all expect to die someday because we've all been stung with the infection of sin. And when death comes, we can expect tears and pain. But we can also hold onto the hope and assurance of our own resurrection. Because Jesus broke the chains of death, now life comes to all people. His victory is ours through the gift of faith. What a wonder! Because he lives, we too will live forever with Jesus in heaven. Amen.