

Easter – Where We Least Expect It
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Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they have put him!” So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus’ head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen. Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.) Then the disciples went back to where they were staying. Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus’ body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot. They asked her, “Woman, why are you crying?” “They have taken my Lord away,” she said, “and I don’t know where they have put him.” At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus. He asked her, “Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?” Thinking he was the gardener, she said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary.” She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, “Rabboni!” (which means “Teacher”). Jesus said, “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.
– John 20:1-18, NIV

Over the years, I have attended and led all different types of Easter services. Most of them were in places like our Chapel -- a space filled with worshippers and music. Sometimes I have attended and led Easter Sunrise Services -- not only in our Outdoor Chapel, but even after hiking up to the top of Stone Mountain in the dark. In the first church I served there was a community tradition in which many of the churches gathered in the local park for a sunrise service. I remember that one because it happened to coincide with the change in daylight savings time. And as I remember, it required me to get up at 4:30 AM according to my “body time” which had not yet shifted. You may have had other experiences of Easter services, as well.

So, here we are . . . here we are. My guess is that if we could go back a little more than a year ago, to February of 2020, none of us could have expected where we would be celebrating Easter today – under a tent on our church ballfield wearing masks and practicing social distancing (we would not even know what that meant), in our cars in the church parking lot, or watching the worship service on our laptop at home. It is Easter where we would least expect it. And yet, if we look once again at the story of the first Easter which we have just read from John’s gospel, and if we look at it through new “lenses” while asking this question, “What was unexpected about the

first Easter?" – I think we may see some things that will help us to see this and every other Easter differently. I think we will see Easter where we least expect it. And I believe that will be a good thing which can bring us hope and help – things we all need.

Now when we use the word "Easter," we're talking about more than just Easter egg hunts, Easter bunnies, and Easter lunch -- which are all nice. But as we gather here for worship, Easter means the resurrection of Jesus from the dead after he had been crucified on a cross. That's what Easter means for us this morning. So, when we ask what is unexpected about Easter, we could probably say, "Well, most everything!" In spite of the words of Jesus to his disciples and others prior to his death and resurrection, apparently no one really expected Jesus to be resurrected.

Now resurrection is not resuscitation, as some have argued over the years -- that Jesus just "swooned" or fainted on the cross and was not really dead but was revived in the tomb where his body was laid. As scholar N. T. Wright reminds us, the Romans were experts at execution and crucifixion. It was their job to make sure it was done right, which meant the person crucified was really dead. No one expected the resurrection really, though the stories of Easter do mention that some of the Jewish religious leaders had heard this rumor of Jesus rising from the dead after three days. So, they persuaded Pontius Pilate, the local Roman in charge, to seal the tomb and post a Roman guard there so that no one could steal the body and claim Jesus was resurrected. But no one was waiting around the tomb to see Jesus resurrected. It was not something anyone expected.

John's version of the Easter story begins with Mary Magdalene coming to the tomb to anoint the body properly with the traditional spices because it had not been done earlier in the rush to get everything done before the Jewish Sabbath on Saturday. Mary expected to find the tomb as it was, but unexpectedly the stone removed from the entrance of the tomb. She assumed that meant the body of Jesus had been taken. So, she runs back to find Peter and another disciple described as "the one Jesus loved" whom we believe to be John, the writer of this gospel. They run back to the tomb. Peter goes in first and sees the strips of linen and the burial cloth that had been on Jesus' body and around his head still placed in their traditional way. The cloth was still lying in its place as if the body were simply taken from the cloth without anything being disturbed. The two disciples go back to where they were staying, presumably to tell the others, and Mary is left there at the tomb.

Mary looks inside the tomb and sees something else incredibly unexpected -- two angels dressed in white, seated where Jesus' body had been -- one at the head and one at the foot. The question they ask her is also unexpected: "Woman why are you crying?" She answers that they have taken her Lord away and she doesn't know where they have put him -- we assume meaning his body. Then she turns around and John says that Jesus was standing there, but she did not recognize him. She thinks he is the gardener. Jesus asked her two questions: "Woman, and why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" And she says to him, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him and I will get him." It is then that Jesus calls her by name, "Mary." She turns toward him and cries out using the Aramaic term "Rabboni" which means "teacher." Jesus says some unusual words about Mary not holding onto him because he's not yet ascended to the Father. I think that means that he's telling her not to grasp or cling to him at this time because there is more yet to come. He tells her to go tell the others that he's going to ascend

to the Father. Mary heads back with the news that she has seen the Lord and she told them all of these things. So much of it was unexpected.

It was even unexpected that the first eyewitness was Mary. In that time, women were not viewed as reliable witnesses and their testimony was not normally admissible in court. And yet, God chooses Mary as the first eyewitness to the resurrected Christ. It would have been very unexpected, especially if you were making up this story and wanted to tell others who had witnessed this -- you would not normally have chosen a woman as your witness. But that is exactly whom God chose! That and so much in this story remind us that *God often does the unexpected, and that is a good thing!*

My guess is that if you have ever been to an Easter service, perhaps more than one, you have heard some version of the message that the meaning of Easter is that we no longer have to fear death. Because of God's grace given to us for the forgiveness of our sins, after this life we will live in the very presence of God and that's the hope we have in Christ. I believe that is true and I have preached that many times. But Easter is *more* than just the good news, as good as it is, that after this life and death we go to heaven with God.

I believe that Easter addresses the basic and fundamental question of our existence: how do we deal with sin and brokenness in our lives and in our world? Some would say it is the foundational question of existence. When we choose to do the things that God does not will for us to do, which is what we mean in the church by the word "sin" -- how is that made right? In our Christian faith, we say that because of Jesus' death on the cross and the resurrection, God through Jesus has dealt once and for all with the sin and the brokenness of the world and everyone in it. It's God's plan for making things right. God created us and wants us to live in a way in which we love God, and we love our neighbor as we love ourselves -- but we don't always do that on our own. So, relationships are broken -- both with God and with each other. So how do we deal with that?

Some belief systems offer other answers such as karma -- which means we get what we deserve, or "what goes around, comes around." But the good news of Easter and of the cross is that God has a different plan -- a plan which is totally unexpected. When it comes to the sin and brokenness in our lives and in our world, God sends Jesus, God's son and God in the flesh, to take on that sin in his death on the cross. God reconciles us to God. There is forgiveness. There is grace. And there is hope for all of us. Therefore, we can be changed and transformed by God's grace as it works its way through our lives to make us the person God created us to be. And we can then do the unexpected -- we can share that love and that forgiveness with others. And this is where the unexpected good news of Easter speaks to us today.

Recently, I was watching a discussion on a news channel in which six pundits were discussing a recent news story about a young woman who was a professional writer and editor at a magazine. She recently was fired for something she tweeted when she was 17 years old. All of the people who were talking were much older than this young woman. And all of them acknowledged that while we should be held accountable for our deeds, if all of us were judged by our worst mistake at age 17, very few of us would probably have the jobs we have now. Obviously, social media has accelerated the ability to share someone's mistakes worldwide in a matter of minutes. But

what was so unexpected about the discussion was that everyone was talking about the need for forgiveness. I heard the words forgiveness and grace repeated again and again by everyone. It was the most unexpectedly theological discussion I have ever heard on a TV news program, and it was really good! But without forgiveness and grace we are stuck with our sin and brokenness, and it seems like the only thing we will be able to do is to point a finger at someone else before they point a finger at us.

Bishop Desmond Tutu has written one of the best books on how forgiveness can work out in real life called *No Future Without Forgiveness*. It is set in South Africa when apartheid was the issue – a time when awful things were done for many years all because of race, power, and fear. But, when those in power were finally overthrown, there was a concern that it would just become a time of vengeance for all the wrongs that had been done over the years. How could they move forward when so many had been killed, tortured, and imprisoned? Would “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” lead to justice, or simply a country in which everyone was eventually blind and toothless?

In his book, Tutu quoted Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who said this: “Unless we learn to live together as brothers [and sisters] we will die together as fools.” In one sense, it is about learning to get along with the great family of humankind. And it is something we each have to start doing better right now. It is also how we find the freedom and forgiveness we are all looking for. Bishop Tutu summed it up by saying this: “It is ultimately in our best interest that we become forgiving, repented, reconciling, and reconciled people, because without forgiveness, without reconciliation, we have no future.” (165)

Easter and the resurrection point to the hope we have for our future -- not just in the life to come, but here and now. We can love our neighbor because God first loved us. God showed us the depth of God's love by dying on that Roman cross for each one of us and for our whole world.

At the end of John's version of the Easter story, Jesus tells Mary there's more to this story and it doesn't end here. He tells Mary to share the news, the good news of Easter. Friends, today we need to go and share the good news with our world, the unexpected good news of Easter. There is a way out of the sin and brokenness in our lives and in our world. There is grace and forgiveness. And there is hope, all because of God's love for each one of us and for this world that God loves and created.

When I last visited Israel, we went to the town of Bethlehem where Jesus was born. Today Bethlehem is divided by a large concrete wall that treats everyone as enemies of each other. On the wall that divides Bethlehem in big block letters are two words that stand out among all the graffiti. The two words? “LOVE WINS.” In the end, it always does. LOVE WINS. That is God's promise and that is God's plan. Our choice today is whether we want to be a part of God's plan by how we love and forgive one another. Choose love -- because in the end, God's love wins! That may be something that is unexpected for us to hear today. And if we share that good news with someone else, it may also seem unexpected. But come to think of it, isn't unexpected good news always the best news of all?

In the strong name of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.