

Luke 24.1-12
Psalm 118.1-2, 14-24
Easter Sunday

Ann J. Deibert
Central Presbyterian Church
8 April 2007

(A disclaimer: This sermon was written to be spoken, which does not always translate into correct grammatical form for a document written to be read.)

Not What You Expected

We all have expectations. Expectations for ourselves, for others, for children, for parents. The disciples had expectations too. They expected—hoped—dreamed—that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. The deliverer. The redeemer. The one who would confront the Roman empire and push the heavy boot of Rome off their necks.

But all that ended when he was arrested, convicted on trumped up charges and condemned to death.

All that ended when he was executed in the style of a common criminal. Nailed to a cross in front of everyone who cared to watch—to serve as a warning to others who might try to stir up rebellion against Rome. There had been riots in Jerusalem before at Passover. Deadly riots. “And so, at each Passover, the Roman governor...rode up to Jerusalem from the imperial capital...[with his] troops to reinforce the Roman garrison...as a deterrent against and preparation for any possible trouble.”¹ They were ready for Jesus—or anyone else like him.

And now Jesus was dead. Like so many of the other zealots and hoped-for messiahs who had come before him. The expectations of his followers dashed. Trampled underfoot by all those Roman soldiers.

All that was left was to bury the body of their friend and then go home—to try to get back to whatever it was they were doing before Jesus of Nazareth caught their attention, sparked their imagination, healed their wounds, quenched their deepest thirsts and fed their oldest hungers.

Living two thousand years on this side of Easter we know what’s going to happen. It’s easy for us to jump ahead to the end of the story—like a child who turns the pages ahead to read the best part. For us, it’s not unexpected that the body of Jesus won’t be there; that the women will be met with news of resurrection.

Now, living in the northern hemisphere and in a moderately warm southern-ish climate (except, of course, for the last few days!) it’s easy for us to think about Jesus being raised from the dead as we see the spring green shoots of daffodils poke up from the ground.

Here, where spring often comes at Easter time, it’s easy to talk about renewal of life and re-birth as we see the trees get all misty with green and the buds of the azaleas fatten up. We expect that each year—even if we’ve had a cold snap or the winter has been long and bitter. We know that spring will come eventually. We know the grass will green up and start to grow again and it’ll soon be time to fire up our mowers (or think about taking the city up on the offer of a \$100 refund to trade in your gas mower and buy a new electric mower).

¹ Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, “Collision Course,” in *Christian Century*, March 20, 2007, p29.

But Jesus being raised from the dead is not like the yellow daffodils nodding their sunny heads in the breeze. Jesus raised from the dead is not like the plants in our yards coming back to life after the long winter. Jesus raised from the dead is simply not natural.

Jesus was dead. His followers didn't expect anything else. It was over.

On Friday afternoon, the women who had followed Jesus watched Joseph of Arimathea place the body of Jesus in a tomb. It was almost the beginning of the sabbath and so the anointing of the dead body with spices and ointments would have to wait until the sabbath was over.

So early on Sunday morning, the women returned to the tomb to finish the burial preparations they had left undone. They had no expectations other than to care for the body of their dead friend. They didn't expect to find anything in the grave beyond a dead body wrapped in a linen cloth.

But listen to all the surprise in the story.

But on the first day...they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but...

They would expect to find the body lying where it had been left on Friday afternoon. But...when they went in, they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly, two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but...

As generally happens in scripture, to see an angel—a messenger from God—is to be terrified and the women did not know what to expect. If anything, they might have expected to be accosted by Roman soldiers. What were they doing coming back to the grave of a revolutionary zealot? It wouldn't have been surprising if they had been met by soldiers looking to round up any more of Jesus' followers who would gather at his grave site.

But...the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but..."

He is not here, his body has been moved by grave robbers, or by some of the disciples who wanted to make it appear he had risen, or whatever other temporary story could be concocted by his disappointed followers.

"He is not here, but has risen."

Then the women remembered that Jesus had said he would rise again on the third day. And they told everything they saw at the tomb to the other disciples. But...

But these words seemed to the others an idle tale, and they did not believe them.

Why would they believe the women? People don't rise from the dead. They weren't expecting any miracles. They weren't expecting anything out of the ordinary. They thought Jesus might be the one but he got smashed by the imperial machine just like all the rest they thought might be the messiah.

It was not what they expected.

All those little "buts" all the way through Luke's telling the story: Every time you are ready to finish the sentence with the ordinary thing you expect, Luke says, "but" and the rest of the sentence is not what you expected.

We come to church on Easter expecting to hear the Good News: like the daffodils blooming, like the trees greening, Jesus too will have come to life.

But it's not like that—that Jesus had been raised was totally unexpected—it was completely unnerving. It was terrifying. Nothing had prepared them for this.

This was God's doing. It wasn't Jesus poking his little daffodil head out of the tomb to see if the coast was clear. This is God acting with justice—vindicating the victim of imperialism. This story is not about a “yearning for life after death, [it's a] conviction that ultimately a truly just God simply had to vindicate the victims of the callous and the [demonically] powerful.” Harvey Cox says, “To restore a dead person to life is to strike a blow at mortality but to restore a crucified man to life is to strike a blow at the system that executed him.”²

Which is Good News not just for Christians but for people of all faiths and people of no faith. God's shalom—God's peace, God's well-being for all of creation—has greater power than all the powers and principalities of this world. That's the Good News we celebrate today.

Jürgen Moltmann, a contemporary German theologian, wrote, “Good Friday is the center of the world, but Easter morning is the Sunrise of the coming of God and the morning of new life and it is the beginning of the future of the world.”³

Which speaks to the question so often raised on Easter morning—if God raising Jesus is the decisive word—that the power of God is stronger than anything else the forces of death and destruction can dish out—then why am I still suffering? why are my family members still suffering? Why is there is still war and pain and grief?

Moltmann says that Easter morning is not the end of the story, it's the beginning of the rest of the story. It's the beginning of the rest of the story undergirded by a reality we never expected. Held together by the trembling truth: In life and in death we belong to God. There is nothing that can separate us from God's love.

Not just you and me personally, but even the whole world—and all of creation. The power of evil and empire, of death and destruction are not the end of the story. They fear God's end to the story. They fear that Jesus would actually walk out of the tomb. And they fear that we will actually believe it. Because if he did, and if we do, it would change everything. And we would be living in a brand new world. And so we are.

“And so we celebrate the resurrection in the ways most precious to us: we crowd into churches today to be part of worship because this truth is so big and so important not one of us is up to understanding it, let alone describing it by ourselves; we celebrate with...great hymns because we can always sing more than we can say...We gather with family and friends to celebrate the goodness of life, our lives, and God's gracious, unending presence with us whatever challenges we may be facing.”⁴

Another way we celebrate the resurrection is by becoming peacemaking partners with God—by becoming shalom seekers—living in this brand new world of God's future and making that brand new world a reality for one another, for all of God's children and for all of creation.

“We live in a Good Friday world that becomes, because of this day, an altogether different place...”

² Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard: Making Moral Choices Today*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004, p274. Quoted in Barbara Brown Taylor, “Preaching Easter,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2006, p46.

³ Jürgen Moltmann and Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *Passion for God*, 2003, quoted in John Buchanan, “The Laughter of the Universe,” March 27, 2005.

⁴ Buchanan.

Which means, we do not need to be afraid of the future; or of tomorrow, whatever it may bring; or even afraid of death.⁵

Christ is risen. Christ is risen, indeed.

⁵ *Ibid.*