

“Easter Expectations and Experience”

Matthew 28:1–10

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What expectations do we bring to this day? Easter is a great day of celebration with many sacred rituals and traditions. It’s about the resurrection of Jesus, the hope this brings for eternal life, and the ultimate victory of love and justice over fear and hostility. But we all bring our own expectations for this day — some superficial and others deeply significant, some hopeful and others not.

We may simply come in anticipation of wonderful music and a reasonably short sermon — there is Easter brunch to enjoy! When I started out in ministry forty-four years ago in Louisville, Kentucky, home of the Kentucky Derby, one thing we watched for was hats, dozens and dozens of Easter hats. Fashion has its place on Easter too.

There are also humorous faux pas to anticipate. I remember an Easter Sunday in another setting when an older lady in the church who was quite a character got up for the last hymn but her skirt did not. She did not try to keep things quiet. By mid-afternoon, the whole town knew because she told everyone she saw. In that same church, when the choir finished the last note of the Hallelujah Chorus at the end of the service, one of the men in the choir, apparently weary, said a bit too loudly, “Hallelujah, it’s over!” We might expect something humorous today.

But we also have expectations that are more weighty. Perhaps we are looking for assurance in an uncertain time that we can still count on God to come through for us. Perhaps we are looking for evidence, if not proof, that this isn’t all just a bunch of wishful thinking. Or perhaps we’re here in a more cynical mode, seeking to confirm that there’s nothing to it, that all of us are play-acting, putting up a good front, trying not to have our true feelings exposed, our questions and doubts revealed.

We come with varied expectations of wide-ranging depth, but whatever our expectations are, if we are like those present for the first

Easter, our experience will be quite different. In our reading from Matthew, as in the other Gospel accounts, no one expects Jesus to be alive. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary go to Jesus' tomb at dawn. Matthew does not say why, though other accounts indicate that the women go to anoint his body, perform a ritual of grief, but they do not go to confirm an expectation that he has been raised from the dead.

At least they are there. The men who have been following Jesus, his disciples, are nowhere to be found. Even though he has told them numerous times that he will suffer, die, and be raised, they have given up all hope when he has died. They are hiding away in grief and fear, wondering if they might be next because of their association with him. It is a typical male response, leaving the women to do the hard emotional work and take the risks. Where would the church be today if it depended entirely on men? But no one expects that an angel will show up, causing an earthquake, move the stone away from the entrance to the tomb, and reveal that Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Yet it happens anyway because this is God's doing — resurrection, life out of death, love over fear, hope from despair. And this is what Easter is about for us — life, love, wonder, mystery, hope, peace. It is best not to try to put this into some theological formula because doing so only reduces the experience. God is more than any name we can give God, and what happens on Easter is bigger than we can capture with words. The longest tenured pastor of this church, John Lewis, referred to the *mystery* of the resurrection. That is the word we should use.

We experience this *mystery* in different ways. We may find the assurance we need and thus recover our faith in God and our hope for eternity. We may find life for some dead place in our lives, open our hearts to the possibility of love or the healing of a relationship like the pedals of a flower opening to morning sunshine. We may rediscover a sense of wonder like the openness of a newborn child or the alertness of a young puppy. But one way or another, the God who is always working to create a new heart and spirit within us will stir new life. The key is that we be willing to leave room for God to be God.

Some suggest that we can only see what we are prepared to see, as in the Power of Positive Thinking. What we see is what we get. And

seeing is a major theme in Matthew's account of resurrection. The women come to *see* the tomb. The angel tells them to *see* where Jesus lay. The Risen Christ tells the women not to be afraid but to tell his brothers to go to Galilee where they will *see* him. Seeing clearly matters but not in the sense of expectations making experience possible.

Easter doesn't depend on our expectations because it isn't about us, it's about God. The God who, according to the prophet Jeremiah, will allow the children of Israel to return to their homeland after all hope has been lost; the God who raises Jesus to new life three days after he has died; the God who raises us with Christ, according to Colossians; this God will create new life in us even when we don't think it is possible.

I think of a member of this church who lost her husband seven years ago. She grieved in healthy ways and never thought about marrying again, but just last month she did, after reconnecting with a man she was friends with sixty years ago who had lost his wife around the time she lost her husband. Neither imagined this new joy, but both firmly believe that God did.

I think of a man in another setting who was a wealthy and influential mover and shaker in town, a highly successful attorney who functioned at light speed, never rested, and had it all... until he didn't. It all fell apart, the details don't really matter, and he collapsed. It was a kind of living death that lasted for what seemed like forever, and he pretty much resigned himself to a meaningless existence until something happened that he hadn't anticipated. He had a moment of reawakening. He rediscovered faith and God and life and hope, and bit by bit he rebuilt his life, not exactly like it was before, he didn't want that. He built a life with more balance, more time for rest and play, more space for people close to him. He built a life he hadn't expected, but God had.

So it goes with Easter stories of hope and resurrection. God is always working for new life and hope every step of the way until death, and even after death. This is the good news the first believers experience, the good news that is ours, whether we expect it or not.

But how do we respond to this news? Well, how do the people who experience the first Easter respond? The guards at the tomb are

terrified. They shake when the angel comes amidst an earthquake and rolls back the stone, and then they become like dead men, they play possum. Beyond our reading, the priests and elders pay the guards to lie about what happened, say the disciples took Jesus' body in the night. They say this will keep the guards out of trouble with the governor, but it will also push back against Jesus' followers claim that he is alive. Leaders are often willing to promote lies, partly because of how often people are willing to believe them.

In any event, there are different responses to what happens on Easter, but how do the faithful respond? The two women respond first with fear and joy when the angel tells them Jesus has risen, and then when Jesus himself greets them, they fall down, clasp his feet, and worship him, whereupon he gives them work to do – they are to tell the others he is alive and where they can meet him. Such are the ways we respond to genuine Easter experiences.

It begins with fear and joy. Fear may not seem necessary. The angel tells the women not to be afraid, but this refers to them potentially worrying that someone has taken his body to do harm to it. And to be clear, they don't need to fear judgment, punishment, or harm from God. But having learned that God has raised Jesus from the dead, they realize they are in the presence of the Holy, they are beholding a great mystery, they are near a kind power they cannot fathom.

Perhaps *awe* is a better word, or *wonder*, but they too shake in the depths of their souls because this isn't just an ordinary bit of good news like our team winning... not that any of ours has... This is the Creator of the universe recreating life right before our very eyes! That Jesus, our beloved teacher and friend is alive, is surely cause for joy, but joy that makes us tremble.

I have shared with some of you an experience I had in adolescence. I had not grown up in the church. Going to church and joining youth activities was my form of rebellion, but it was also an expression of the kind of deep spiritual yearning that is part of adolescence. One evening, as I was following a guidebook on devotional life, I prayed, to the extent that I knew what prayer was, that if God really existed, God would give me some clear sign. Almost immediately, I wondered what I would do if

the Creator of the universe showed up in my room in a personal way. I felt a sense of awe, bordering on fear, and then I had the unmistakable feeling that I was not alone, and the awe intensified.

Over the years, I have had other experiences like this — on a mountaintop in Kenya, looking over Lake Galilee, when our children were born, when I have been privileged to be with families at bedsides when loved ones have departed this world — times when I knew I was not alone, when I was in the presence of Holy Mystery. Easter involves such an experience wherein we are moved to joy that makes us tremble.

But we don't stop here, like the first people who experience the good news of resurrection, we are moved to worship and faithful service. It doesn't come as a mandate. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary are not told — you bow down and worship now and go do something useful! It is a natural response to meeting the Risen Christ. They bow down in worship and then happily do whatever he calls them to do.

What this means is that we don't have to keep a to-do list in our heads. If we encounter the Risen Christ, we will feel a sense of joyful awe and we will be moved to worship and service. It's like a child's response to a parent or grandparent, a puppy's response to a human companion, it just happens. We don't have to anticipate it. In fact, we often can't. We don't have to make plans for how to respond. Easter just happens, and we are grateful that it does.

It is still okay to have expectations, as long as we remember that this day doesn't fit neatly into any category of understanding. There are no odds we can depend on because God's capacities are limitless. It's why we sing so much today and talk as little as possible. Easter is a day when theology gives way to doxology, when words lead to songs. Christ is risen, alleluia, thanks be to God!