

Expect the Impossible  
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“Expect the Impossible” Pilgrim Church UCC, March 27, 2016, Easter Sunday (Luke 24:1-12)

In February of 1952 there was a terrible nor'easter off the coast of the Cape. Not one but two oil tankers broke apart in the storm and the Pendleton's crew was in peril. The captain and seven crew members died in the accident and thirty-three crew members were trapped in the hull which soon began to flood. All of the available Coast Guard ships had already been sent out to rescue the other oil tanker. So in the darkness of that February night the Coast Guard sent a 36-foot wooden motor lifeboat operated by four young sailors into the treacherous waters of the Atlantic to attempt to save the survivors.

Visibility was awful as it was night and the snow came down horizontally and the waves were cresting at almost seventy feet. Crossing the Chatham Shoal was impossible at best. Their lifeboat rolled over twice in the attempt to get out to sea with their compass and windshield smashing before their eyes. The engine stalled several times and their youngest sailor (Andy Fitzgerald) had to crawl into a small space to fix it, severely burning himself in the process. But lifeboat captain Bernie Webber was determined to reach the Pendleton's surviving crew. And he succeeded--rescuing all the survivors in one trip even though the boat had an official capacity of only twelve. The rescue of the Pendleton off the coast of the Cape has gone down in Coast Guard history as the greatest small boat rescue ever and was recently depicted in Disney's *The Finest Hours*.<sup>[1]</sup>

It's a compelling story because the odds are stacked against this Coast Guard crew in almost cruel ways. Watching the movie (not knowing the story previously) I kept thinking what else can possibly go wrong and then something else would go wrong! The nor'easter at night and the snow and the waves and the small boat and the inexperienced crew and the compass breaking and the engine stalling and Fitzgerald's burns. By all known logic--they should not have even reached the sinking Pendleton. It was impossible. And it happened. When they went out to sea on that February night (in real life) the Coast Guard crew in that small wooden boat actually sang a hymn to calm their nerves, working as a unified team calling on God to help.

Don't we love stories that make the impossible possible? Don't we love stories that defy the odds? Stories where Frodo makes it all the way to Mount Doom and destroys the One Ring, saving Middle Earth. Where Luke makes that impossible shot to blow up the Death Star, protecting the Galaxy for a while. Where Harry defeats Voldemort through sheer love and the Wizarding World knows peace. Where Edith Crawley finally gets her happily ever after--thank the Lord as that was a long time coming in six seasons of *Downton Abbey*. Where the underdog team wins against all odds (even if our March Madness brackets are ruined because of their Cinderella story.) Don't we love stories that make the impossible possible?

And that's one reason Easter is the greatest story of our Christian faith. Easter reminds us that we can expect the impossible with God. The reactions from people in Luke's Gospel to Christ's resurrection vary from feeling perplexed, terrified, unbelieving, and amazed. Perhaps not so different from our reactions!

Logically we shouldn't even be here this morning. Because Jesus' message should have died with him after everything that happened from Palm Sunday through Holy Saturday. Luke tells us that Judas betrayed Jesus. The disciples are MIA after his arrest in Gethsemane. Peter

followed Jesus to his trial before the religious authorities only to deny three times that he even knew him. And Jesus died on a Roman cross with some of the women looking on from a distance as he took his last breath. "Father into your hands I commend my spirit." [2] Finally, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus and laid it in a rock-hewn tomb to give him some small shred of dignity. And that's right where the story should have ended, period.

But we can expect the impossible with God. Physical resurrection or spiritual resurrection--our understandings vary in the Christian tradition. Though as Franciscan priest Richard Rohr reminds us: "Resurrection is not woundedness denied, forgotten, or even totally healed. It is always woundedness transformed." [3] However we understand the resurrection, we can perhaps agree that a transformation occurred.

For we know that the followers of Jesus continued to experience him as a living spiritual presence--as proof that love ultimately wins and sin and death aren't the final words in God's story. We know it because Jesus' message of compassion and God's unending grace only spread faster and farther after his death, after his followers experienced the Risen Christ. How else can we explain the transformation of the disciples from betrayers, deniers, and abandoners to people who courageously faced persecution in Christ's name? How else can we explain Saul's transformation from a persecutor of the followers of Jesus to Paul--arguably the most influential person in early Christianity besides Jesus himself? Something impossible happened that first Easter that can set our hearts on fire with God's love in a way that nothing else can. That is the power of religious experiences that connect us and open us to the Divine in mysterious and awe-inspiring ways.

In our Christian tradition, we trust that transformation is the result of an encounter with the Risen Christ. This is what we see when the Risen Christ walks with the disciples to Emmaus and becomes known to them in the breaking of the bread. This is what we see when Saul sees the light on the road to Damascus. This is what we see when we put our faith into action today: feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the sick and lonely, advocating for justice.

Though here's the caveat. We can expect the impossible with God. We can be transformed by our experiences of the Risen Christ and share the love with others. And even so, the Way of discipleship isn't easy and we won't always get what we hope and pray for. We all most likely have experiences of unanswered prayers and suffering. God unfortunately never promised us a rose garden and we will never be able to understand exactly how God works. God is as close to us as our next breath and yet as distant as the farthest star in the sky.

Remember that resurrection occurs after crucifixion. New life occurs after suffering. Suffering can be transformed, not denied or forgotten or even fully healed. This is the hope of Easter. Transformation/rebirth/new life is what God desires for us though God can't prevent every hardship.

What we can trust is that God delights more in that one found sheep than the ninety-nine who never got lost in the first place. God gets a kick out of that banquet with random people brought in off the street who don't even know each other. God runs to meet us when we've had enough shame to break us open and force us to come on home. We have these glimpses of God's grace from Luke's Gospel alone.

And the Gospels are inspired human glimpses of a God far beyond our capacity to contain. The powers that be once tried to contain Jesus on a cross and inside a tomb and we see how well that turned out for them. We can't contain God in our safe comfortable boxes anymore than folks could contain Jesus in that tomb. But we can respond to the mysterious, loving, awe-inspiring presence of God. We can get up and run to the tomb, stoop and look in, and

see what there is to discover. We can go home, amazed at what happened. For we can expect that the "impossible" story of Easter and the "impossible" experiences of the Risen Christ can actually transform us and our world. May it be so. Amen.

[1] Charles McGrath, "'The Finest Hours' Relives a Perilous, Forgotten Rescue," January 7, 2016, The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/10/movies/the-finest-hours-relives-a-peri...>

[2] Luke 23:46, NRSV.

[3] Richard Rohr, *Immortal Diamond: The Search for our True Self*, 161-162.