

Expect the Unexpected
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
Date: April 5, 2015

12:45

"Expect the Unexpected" Pilgrim Church UCC, April 5, 2015—Palm Sunday (Mark 16:1-8)

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." [1] I don't know that any of us would label Easter as scary. We attend church, load up on candy, have Easter Egg hunts, and spend time with those we love. We likely don't flee in terror from the festivities.

That first Easter was totally unexpected. The story goes that the women head to the tomb early because they want to care for Jesus' body. They wonder who can roll the stone away. Mary Magdalene, Mary (James' mom), and Salome discover that the entrance is clear and the tomb is empty. They see an Angel who tells them don't be alarmed. Of course it's alarming! The Angel says you're looking for Jesus who was crucified, but he's been raised. He's not here. Go, tell his disciples (even Peter) that he's going on to Galilee. And they flee, amazed and mute with fear.

Whether we believe in the bodily resurrection, a spiritual resurrection, or we don't know what we believe—something awe-inspiring happened that first Easter. Maybe it was so incredible that the only reaction those women could muster was fear of the unexpected as they had just looked up at Jesus from the foot of the cross days before. He may have promised that his death wasn't the end. But did they really believe it? He may have promised that love would win, but were they really counting on it? Not really, as they brought their spices early in the morning to embalm his body, expecting to care for him one last time and to get some closure.

That first Easter illustrates an unexpected religious experience, an encounter with the Divine so extraordinary that the women couldn't even talk about it right then and there. This is a common phenomenon for folks who have religious experiences—what they encounter is hard to put into words. Both because it's difficult to describe and because other people may think that you're crazy!

There's mysticism in every World Religion. Some people have visions or dream dreams or hear beyond their sense organs. Like the still, small voice of God Elijah heard in 1 Kings. Others speak of seeing as a dawning realization. Buddhists use the phrase "seeing things as they are" as part of enlightenment. Some people have mystical experiences through ordinary objects that carry extraordinary meaning. People experience God in nature—the deep silence of a forest, the starry sky, the ocean. Someone standing right next to them may not feel what they're feeling. Yet that person knows that for a moment in time, they felt like part of something so much bigger than themselves. [2]

This ineffable, mysterious, terrifying, amazing religious experience these women had that first Easter some 2,000 years ago still lingers. Why? Because the presence of Christ is still here! Just a few years ago, the good folks at the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life conducted a survey on religious and mystical experiences. They found that 49% of American adults polled have had a religious or mystical experience like some of the ones I just described. [3] 49% of American adults—it's incredible! God is with us and moving among us and sometimes we can feel it. We may be so afraid of the power behind what we encounter, and afraid of what other people will think about what we encounter, that we can't even talk about it. Some of us may have mystical experiences but chalk it up to coincidence or a fluke or it's just something that

we rationalize away. It may not sink in until years later that there was something significant about that moment in our lives.

Should we read our Easter Story of the women encountering the empty tomb, conversing with an angel, and being told of Jesus' Resurrection as just some outlandish Bible story? We can, but that's so lame. It's especially lame knowing that many modern Americans report that we've experienced the Divine. Mystical experiences cross religions or no religion at all and cross cultures and languages and educational levels and any category you can possibly imagine. Maybe you don't think you've ever had a mystical or religious experience, but there's nothing saying that you won't. This is the hope of Easter. God is at work in ways that we cannot predict or expect.

I truly believe that those women experienced something astonishing a few days after Jesus died. And it scared them speechless and sent them running at first. The author of Mark tells us the story of the Resurrection as best as he can make sense of it—a divine message, God fulfilling promises, Jesus not being defined or confined by that tomb. He's telling us the story of something so unexpected that it's no wonder we encounter Easter every year both hopeful and baffled.

Now this may come as a shock, but God didn't write the Bible. People wrote the Bible. The Bible comes down to people sharing their meaningful insights about God and humanity. The books of the Bible were written during particular times and in particular places by particular people with particular worldviews. Yet, the sacred truths they contain are held out to us this Easter morning and can transform our lives.

Sometimes our difficulty is that we tend to be dualistic thinkers—we see things as either/or, us vs. them, head vs. heart. It's funny to think that three years ago Richard Dawkins and then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams had a highly publicized debate that some labeled Science vs. God. Because apparently it always has to be a battle. People expected them to aggressively go after each other. After all, you had Richard Dawkins who wrote *The God Delusion* debating Rowan Williams, Senior Bishop of the Church of England and leader of the worldwide Anglican Communion. But Dawkins and Williams were super polite to each other! They sat in comfy chairs, sipped some water, just shootin' the breeze. Dawkins was asked if he could disprove the existence of God. He confessed that he couldn't, describing himself as really an Agnostic. Twitter just about exploded! Williams related that he believes in evolution. And on it went. Yes, they had points of disagreement. But the person representing science and the person representing God spent much of the debate finding commonalities.[4]

Maybe my hopes are too high, but if Richard Dawkins and Rowan Williams of all people can sit down together, basically sing Kumbaya, and find areas of agreement, then modern Christians can always find meaning in the Resurrection. Even if we'll never understand that empty tomb fully because of how we think, there's so much meaning here. Christ has been, is, and will be present with us for all our days to come. Christ's presence can give us hope, inspire us to believe, and help us to go out and follow in his footsteps. As William Sloane Coffin once said: "Christ is risen for us . . . to put love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more iron up our spines." [5]

For Mark begins his Gospel with: "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" and ends with: "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." [6] Mark teaches us how the life, ministry, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ can change us and change the world. Mark tells us the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He challenges our fear of the unknown and our apathy. He challenges us to be passionate followers of Jesus. Mark's Gospel is told with urgency, using the word "immediately" forty-two times! He

desperately wants us to understand that the tomb is empty, Jesus has gone ahead of us, and it's on us now to respond, immediately!

In the end, devoting our lives to God and following in the Way of Jesus Christ isn't always easy. In fact, sometimes it's really hard because we can expect the unexpected. For our God is a God of new beginnings, second chances, promises fulfilled, and love so strong it conquers death itself. Our God is a God of Resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Mark 16:8

[2] "Religious Experience," Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/religious-experience/>

[3] Derek Michaud, "Religious and mystical experiences common among Americans," February 16, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scienceonreligion/2012/02/religious-and-mys...>

[4] Tim Walker, "Science vs. God: Richard Dawkins Takes on Archbishop of Canterbury," February 24, 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/science/science-vs-god-richard-dawkins...>

[5] William Sloane Coffin, *Letters to a Young Doubter*, 169.

[6] Mark 1:1 and 16:8.