

Easter**Tales of the Unexpected**

Isaiah 65:17-25; John 20:1-18

Some people like surprises, others are nervous of them and like to be prepared. Some people can move through life reacting to situations as they arrive, quick on their feet, responding naturally to anything that comes up, others like to plan methodically, think out all the possible outcomes, and have a variety of ways to respond to a range of likelihoods.

Whether you are a go with the flow person, or a methodical planner, the Jesus event on Easter Day doesn't fit.

Nobody, despite everything Jesus had said beforehand, expected what happened. Pilate, with his washed hands did not expect a sentenced dead man to return. The chief priests, after the scourging and crucifying, did not expect the dead man to return. The disciples, scattered in fear and guilt, did not expect the dead man to return. The women followers, with their funeral spices and ointments, did not expect the dead man to return.

That Jesus returned, somehow, in some way, that was real to those who met Him after His death, is a tale of the unexpected.

At the heart of the Bible reading for Easter is the unexpected resurrection appearance of Jesus to Mary Magdalene. At the heart of that part of the story is her unexpected story: "I have seen the Lord."

This tale of the unexpected tells of a seeking woman who is surprised by what she finds, or better, is surprised by the One Who finds her. Hearing her name spoken by Jesus' familiar voice transforms her expected grief into her unexpected confusion and joy. From the expected, predictable old world of pain and misunderstanding and rejection and fear, an unexpected new world of healing and joy and reconciliation and hope is revealed.

This tale of the unexpected, this tale of the empty tomb is pregnant with potential meaning not yet understood. But what it will mean transforms both past and future for the eager disciples

who encounter it.ⁱ Peter and John find only the empty wrappings, the leavings of One Who had left death, and only later will these men understand what presence this absence bodes.

For Mary, who had first discovered the empty tomb and told her tale of the unexpected, she returned not out of curiosity or hope but to pay grief's homage to One she had loved. When she looks into the tomb again, she sees not only the emptiness, but also unexpected messengers sitting on the stone where the dead body of Jesus had lain, making it look like the Ark of the Covenant, once in the temple, with its two winged cherubim covering the Commandments of God.

But Mary turns away from this. This tale of the unexpected with its angels and religious symbolism and supernatural promise and implications could not hold her attention. It did not compensate for the reality of Jesus, and did not dissolve her grief. He is not there, and she turns away.

To be confronted by the opening sentence of the next chapter in that unexpected tale. Confused, she mistakes the unexpected figure in front of her as the gardener. He says her name, "Mary."

Mary's closed world, her unfinished story, is broken open, and begins a new chapter. Something illogical, impossible, and unnatural takes place. The established rules as to what can happen and how are overthrown. Past events are in a shambles. It is a new day, beginning with this unexpected tale.

Scholars often remind us that the resurrection stories are really commissioning tales, sending believers out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word, that the story goes on. Otherwise, no one would ever know what happened and Easter would be just a reunion story with tears and hugs all round. The expected ending is transformed into a tale of the unexpected, leaving more questions than giving answers, but offering to all of us who hear it a new beginning. Mary is told to go and tell the others what she has seen, and to them, she returns. No longer with a tale of an empty tomb, but now, "I have seen the Lord."

It is Easter, and for us today the joy of the baptism of a child, and an adult, and profession of

faith – for us we have witnessed an echo of what Mary said, “I have seen the Lord”. Not fully understood, not fully comprehended in every detail, but seen, experienced, and encountered the Lord.

On this day the assumption is that my job will be to make sense of the resurrection story, to reduce the mystery, and to make God understandable. No one has ever put it to me that plainly, but for those who want a modern-minded faith the assumption is implicit. You bring your questions to an expert. I have fallen prey to this reasoning; I've preached dozens of sermons that aim to explain, clarify, and demystify.

One of the reasons I love all the people who come to the Easter service is that your arrival stands as a direct refutation of such nonsense.

If people came to church to hear reason, Easter would not be the most popular Sunday of the year because *there is nothing sensible about the resurrection*. It is a tale of the unexpected. Easter ought to leave preachers scratching their heads. We are not able to define or even describe the resurrection.

The first thing preachers ought to admit at Easter is that God has done the incomprehensible; but not the illogical. A little girl was in primary one group, and the church gave her Sunday school class purple plastic Easter eggs to take home. The egg contained a slip of paper. She was right in the midst of learning how to read so she seized on the paper's monosyllabic words eagerly. She read with confidence. "He is . . ." Then she paused, carefully considering both syllables in the third word. "He is . . . raisins?"

"He is raisins" is illogical. "He is risen" is merely incomprehensible. When preachers speak about God we should distinguish between things that do not make sense and things we cannot make sense of; Easter falls into the latter category. We can't explain it. We shouldn't try. But we can stand in joy and awe before it.

So take this tale of the unexpected, and look at its impact. Mary Magdalene, from grieving soul to rejoicing witness. Peter and John, from frightened followers to confident preachers. The other disciples, from being confused and guilty to being clear and committed. From the certainty of

death to the uncertainty of resurrection life. From shattering doubt to growing faith. From a story that had said, 'The End', to a story that read, 'To be continued...'

This Easter morning, happy or sad, believing or doubting, confused or convinced, the tale of the eternally unexpected Jesus speaks to us all. Turn the page with Him, and continue wondering about and following Him for the rest of your lives.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen

ⁱ John K Stendhal, Feasting on the Word Year C, Vol2 p374