

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 20:1-18
Sermon Title: "What Do You Expect?" (Easter)

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Have you ever run into a situation you didn't expect? Has something ever happened to you that caught you off-guard? I drove home one summer day to find out that my son had mowed the grass. That is something pleasant I didn't expect. A young couple takes a certain test and discovers that they are having a baby soon. A reimbursement check comes in the mail from the doctor's office, because they overcharged you. You think you got at least a C on the math final in school, and later you learn that you got an A. Those are pleasant results we don't mind discovering, when they are unexpected.

Of course, there are the unexpected things that pop up that shock us. We go for a routine check-up at the doctor's office, and the doctor says we have heart disease or cancer. We get a utility bill in the mail, and it is much higher than we anticipated. We want to pay it off, but we discover we have no cash in the bank to cover it. A friend dies, and we just saw that friend yesterday, and he seemed as strong as an ox. Have you ever run into a situation you didn't expect? Some are fun, and some are downright unacceptable.

Mary Magdalene gets up early one morning, so early that the sun hasn't peaked over the horizon yet. She wants to pay her respects to Jesus, who was crucified the other day on a cross. Mary is like commuters who hit the highway hours before rush hour clogs the streets, but she may not be leaving so early from home to beat the crowds who may soon visit Jesus' tomb. She may be rising early because she wants to pay her respects quietly, all alone, just her and what is left of her beloved Master.

Mary's heart is heavy with grief. She cannot believe her Master is gone. He did so much for her: Luke says in his Gospel that Jesus removed seven demons from her.¹ Tradition says that Mary was the woman Jesus rescued from being stoned in John 8, that same woman who was caught in the act of adultery. Whatever Mary Magdalene did in life, Jesus saved her from it all, and she is most grateful for it. She cannot forget how Jesus loved her, and she misses him terribly.

But when she approaches the tomb, she comes across a scene she does not expect. The huge stone that covered the entrance has been rolled to the side. Even though it is still dark outside, Mary can see that even darker, gaping hole of the tomb, and this shouldn't be. The massive stone should be covering

¹ Luke 8:2.

the entrance. She doesn't know what to do, except to run back to town and fetch the disciples Peter and John. They scurry to the tomb, and discover something they never would have imagined. The two disciples investigate, and they find folded burial clothes that covered Jesus' body, but no body to be seen at all. Jesus is gone. Their Master is gone. The disciples go back home, presumably in a daze.

Mary Magdalene cannot go home. She is overwhelmed with tears. Have you ever cried so hard that your face is covered with water as though you just got out of the shower, and your eyes become like swollen balloons, and you can't stand up because you feel faint? This is Mary's condition. It is one thing to have to visit Jesus' tomb and pay respects; it is another thing, and a worse unexpected thing, to visit a tomb in which your beloved Master is gone. The idea of Jesus' body disappearing is too much for Mary to handle. She cries a good long time.

Eventually she plucks up the courage to investigate the tomb, and sees two angels. We know they are angels, but at the moment does Mary know? She may not know at the time, because she is distraught. She doesn't even consider why they are in the tomb at all. They ask her why she is crying, and she blubbers about people taking away her Lord and

not being able to find him. She still means to mourn his death and pay respects to his remains. She has got to do this for her own good.

She turns around, and thinks the gardener has just shown up to begin his work early. She really does not know that Jesus is standing right in front of her, because tears are still pouring out of her eyes and nose. She is a complete, dripping mess.² The “gardener” asks about her crying, and between trying to catch her breath and hold back some tears she asks him where the body of her Master is. “If you have taken him away, please, PLEASE, show me where he is. I will take care of his body, if you cannot in this tomb here.”

Mary doesn’t expect any of this. She didn’t want to come to the tomb to mourn somebody she loved dearly, and who loved her dearly; but now she has to go through this rigmarole, this intolerable, unbelievable situation. Where is his body? She should not have to go through all of this: “Please show me his body, so I can get on with what I have to do.”

And then the “gardener,” Jesus, speaks. He simply says her name, “Mary.” Mary’s heavy breathing stops. She blinks away the tears. The light bulb in her head switches on, and for the first time she can see past her intolerable, unexpected situation. She turns to face

² William Barclay, *The Gospel of John: Volume 2*, cf. 312-313.

Jesus, because she had turned back to look in the gaping, empty tomb. He is not in there, because he is out here, and he is alive! Jesus is alive! Mary becomes the first person to see the resurrected Lord and Savior. And she calls him, "Rabboni, Teacher," and she is so overwhelmed with joy that she cannot contain herself.

An intolerable, unexpected situation becomes an acceptable and joyous unexpected situation. Mary wants to grab Jesus and hold him, but he refuses. He has much to do before too long, so he asks Mary not to touch him. Instead, she should report to the disciples about the things she has seen, so they too might have the joy that Mary has. She runs off, bursting with delight.

Here we are, once again, on another Easter morning. The ladies have bought new dresses for themselves and for their daughters. The young boys may be wearing ties and nicer clothing today, and they fought their parents tooth and nail this morning not to wear those clothes, but eventually the parents won out. And the men aren't making such a fuss but probably wearing what they normally wear to church. Today is a special day, no matter how we approach it. This is the day we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is the greatest event to occur for all of

humanity. Even if we put together all the great moments in history, Christ's resurrection would still top the list.

Do we expect anything to be different today? Do we expect this day to be more special than any other day? We come here not because we want to show off our new clothes. We come not because we think it is a good thing to do. We come because we expect something to happen to us, because of what today means. We should expect something to happen inside and outside us today.

We expect something, whenever we enter a worship service. We should always expect something to occur. My prayer every Sunday morning is that we would be transformed by our worship in some way. In little or large degrees, the worship service ought to transform us, in which we are different people when leaving than when we were coming in. We must have a heightened sense of who God is after church services. We should feel we have entered the presence of the Divine, and that God has touched us in some manner, whether through the sermon or the songs or the giving of money or through prayers. We should expect this from worship every time we leave this place, today and every Sunday. We should never expect anything less.

What about Jesus Christ himself? What do we expect from Christ? We should expect something, if we believe him to be our Savior, if we desire to grow in a stronger relationship with Christ every day.

When we leave this place and gather with our families for the annual Easter dinner, we should expect Christ to be present. We should expect his resurrection to affect us at the dinner table and throughout the rest of the week, as well as during worship. Christ isn't nearby only on Sunday but every day of the week. There is no time and no place that Christ is not next to us, and dwelling within us.

When the unexpected problems arise – you know, those unplanned and unwelcomed things that come out of the blue and steal away our joy – when those things happen, it may seem that Christ is nowhere to be found. Christ might appear to be strangely absent. The tears may be filling our eyes too much for us to see Christ is standing in front of us. The anger and bitterness may be clouding our perception of Jesus being present. He has never left us. Like Mary Magdalene who thought she was talking to the gardener, the “gardener” in our situations is Christ himself.

Disappointments and frustrations and hurt feelings will always set us back, and during those times we need to take a moment to observe where

Christ is. We need to wait for his voice to call our names. A seminary professor once wrote in an email that she doesn't know why Jesus speaks our names, except that we cannot see the resurrected Christ any other way. When he says our names, we can see him as he is. We then can look for him to break through the bruised emotions and damaged thoughts to show us that there is a way past them, a way in which we don't have to stay hurt and mad anymore. Christ is nearby in the good times and in the bad times, and we should expect no less. Christ would never do any less.

AND, what are Christ's expectations of us? Ah, this is an interesting question: what are Christ's expectations of us, because he has them. This is a very painful question to answer, not because we don't know what Christ expects of us, but because we don't want to answer it. We don't want to think Christ has expectations of us, both today and every day.

His expectations go beyond looking good on an Easter morning and gathering with family for an Easter meal. His expectations go beyond acting and speaking properly. His expectation is to be in relationship with us every second of our lives. His expectation is for us to do as he did, when he lived on earth: to serve at the pleasure of our God and Father. Early in his ministry Jesus said, "My food – my very

sustenance – is to do the will of the One who sent me, and complete his work... I can do nothing on my own... because I seek to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.”³ Think of the food we may eat later with family, and understand that none of that great feast can satisfy the craving that Christ expects us to have for him. He expects a transformation within and without, a life-change in which everything we believe comes from God, and everything we do accomplishes God’s perfect will for all.

This takes us growing in faith. Coming to church will help the faith-growth process, but also reading Scripture every day along with devotional books and booklets. Praying with God every day helps us to grow. Talk with God about anything – God is never too great to hear what we have to say. Prayer with God also means listening, and we can do that by observing what is happening around us and to us. Listening to what others say might also help us hear God, because God may be speaking through them. We have to ask God if this is the case, and ask God to guide us as we move forward.

Today is a special day. It is a day Mary Magdalene and the disciples never planned for, but it happened nonetheless. New life was given to them unexpected,

³ John 4:34 and 5:30.

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Christ wants us to truly believe that he is risen from the grave, and that his death means our death to sin, and that his life means our everlasting life with God. Christ wants us to believe, and then take on his call to be everything God wants us to be as his children and his disciples. If we do this, we should expect more joy, more love, and more life.