

Expect the Unexpected - 2016 Easter Sermon
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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Mark 16:1-8

It's been my experience that when something we hoped for doesn't happen, we all say pretty much the same thing: "*Well, what can you expect?*"

You've said it. I've said it. My hunch is that every language on the face of this planet has a similar phrase. It's an expression of being resigned to the way things are -- usually said with a sad shake of the head and a weary shrug of the shoulders.

Somebody who has disappointed you a hundred times before, messes up lets you down once again.

"Well, what can you expect?"

You pick up the newspaper and read about what Congress is doing or -- more likely -- not doing.

"Well, what can you expect?"

A family prays for a loved one to get well, and it begins to look for a while like she might make it, but then suddenly, things turn south.

"Well, what can you expect?"

Whenever we dare to hope that life will be different, that the way things have always been is going to change...

Maybe the weak won't always be at the mercy of the strong.

Maybe miracles do happen.

Maybe this time it will all work out.

Whenever we dare to hope, only to have life turn out the way it always has...

"Well, what can you expect?"

I believe, with every fiber of my being, that is what Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome were thinking on that morning a long, long time ago when they went to his grave.

In their hands was the proof. Mark says they *"brought spices so that they might go and anoint him"* and you don't do that for someone who's alive.

Here's what they may have believed would happen...

Someone would probably meet them at the cemetery gate and say, *"I sure am sorry about your friend."*

And they would respond, *"Well, what can you expect?"*

They expected to feel all that anger again at the Romans for doing this to this innocent man they loved.

They expected the grief to come flooding back once they uncovered his body and saw him lying there.

They knew the sad drill.

They would find someone strong to roll away the stone. They would make their visit. Pay their respects. Do what they came to do with the spices they'd brought.

And then they would walk away, knowing what they'd always known: You're born; you die. You try to do the right thing like this man did, and look what it gets you.

And for the three of them, and for all the other people he left behind, life would go on as it had always gone on.

That's what they expected.

The last thing they thought they'd see when they went into that dark tomb was this strange young man, dressed in white so clean that it almost glowed, just sitting there, waiting to greet them.

And the last thing they expected this mysterious stranger to say was, *"Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus ... who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."*

They weren't expecting that.

But that's what happened. And his followers have been telling this outlandish story ever since. Too strange and miraculous, and yet somehow true. A story about something we never expected to happen in a million years ... happening.

And I know some of you have a hard time believing this story. There was a time in my life when I only half believed it myself. But I do now. I believe it as much as I believe I'm standing here with you.

I've seen too many people take their last breath absolutely at peace because of this story not to believe it.

I've seen too many people, when the world has taken away everything dear to them; live with a defiant kind of joy because of this story.

I've seen too many people hope in a future not tethered to this present reality for me not to believe this story.

I believe that God did something amazing back there in that cemetery a long, long time ago. I don't know how it happened, or what it looked like when it happened. Even the four Gospel writers can't agree on all the details.

Mark's version, which we heard today, ends here. *"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."* End of story. That's it. How bizarre...

Too bizarre, in fact, for some of the earliest Christians. Somewhere along the line, a couple of other possible endings to the gospel of Mark were tacked on, because dropping off right there was just too strange. But the evidence from the oldest manuscripts that have been found are pretty clear that the ending we've just heard was, in fact, the original.

It seems just so unexpected, though. You would have no reason to imagine that the telling of Jesus' resurrection would conclude with some women running away because they were afraid. Where's the sharing of the good news? Where's the appearance of the risen Christ? Where are the rest of the disciples?

It's just not how the story should end.

Or is it? Is a completely abrupt and unexpected ending perfect for the telling of Christ's resurrection...?

After all, the resurrection itself is the ultimate in unexpected endings. It's simply not what anyone assumed would happen. Not Judas when he betrayed him, nor the rest of the disciples when they ran away. Certainly not Pilate, who gave the command for Jesus to receive the Empire's punishment for their worst political dissidents. And neither the chief priests who played along, nor even the soldier who, as he watched Jesus breathe his last, was the only human in Mark's telling to confess that "*this man was God's Son.*" None of them expected the resurrection.

Sure, Jesus said to his disciples a few times that he was going to be handed over, get crucified, and on the third day rise again, but they'd had a hard-enough time accepting even the part about getting killed. How much less would they have been expecting the resurrection to actually happen?

Most of us spend our day-to-day lives not expecting resurrection, either, if we're honest.

Improvements? Sure.

Things getting better here and there? Yeah, why not.

But to expect that which is truly resurrection—new life out of that which was dead, a new future out of that which we thought was a dead end, a new and unexpected ending out of what we presumed already had been settled—we rarely actually expect that.

Rather, we expect broken relationships to remain exactly that: broken.

We assume the prisons set up for us by anxiety or fear or childhood baggage or adulthood addictions will always remain, doors locked and bars solid.

In our better moments, we might hope for transformation of some injustice or inequality, but rarely do most of us truly expect it.

We assume that the way life runs—ourselves, our relationships, the systems, the communities, the world—the way life runs is the way it will always be.

But the truth, my friends, is that the power of God does not depend on, or even, wait for our expectations to keep pace.

God raised Jesus to new life when the world least expected it, when he had no life, when he was dead, dead, dead. God raised up Jesus, and showed the so-called powers of this world who was in charge, right when they thought they were at the height of their control.

The truth is, the power of God does not depend on our expectations.

And the glory of God does not wait for our expectations.

And the love of God does not even abide our expectations.

The power, the glory, the love of God is to bring all things to resurrected life—you, me, us, this world, the whole creation and cosmos, even.

And that is an ending we might not ordinarily expect.

I believe that Almighty God raised a dead Jesus and, in that incredible act, reversed the expected order of things. Turned our broken world right on its head. Flipped the script. Changed the ending. Now the river runs backwards from death to life,
from war to peace,
from despair to hope,
and from tears to joy.

I do believe that. And I've put all my eggs in the Easter basket of this story. And I'll keep telling it. Because "*Jesus is alive again*" makes all the difference in how we move forward, overcome our fears, handle our past and face our future.

Resurrection gives us hope that the way things have always been, will not always be. Jesus is alive. As far as I can tell, that means we can expect most anything now. Isn't it so? Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Hallelujah and Amen!