

EASTER SUNDAY

April 5, 2015

Mark 16:1-8

"God's Greatest Surprise"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

When things are going badly for us; when all our hopes have died, we may often say: ***"Well, what can you expect?"***

It's an expression we use when we're resigned to the way things are. We had hoped things would turn out different, but we were disappointed. It's usually **said with a sad shake of the head and a weary shrug of the shoulders.**

"What can you expect?"

Whenever we dare to hope that life will be better for a change, that the way things have always been is going to be different somehow, reality comes and dashes those hopes. *"Well, what can you expect?"*

It's pretty clear in today's Gospel reading the three women: Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, all knew what to expect.

They weren't looking for any miracles that morning when they went to the tomb where Jesus' body lay. **They knew that when someone dies, they stay dead.**

We can tell by what they were carrying just what they expected. They had bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. **You don't do that for somebody who's alive.** They knew what to expect.

Just imagine how they felt. Remember, it was the women who had stayed near the cross when the male disciples all ran away.

The women had stood and watched as their beloved teacher hung there in agony, and cried out, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* before He breathed his last,

This was the man who was going to **bring salvation and liberation to the Jewish people.**

This was **the rabbi who had brought a breath of fresh air and grace into a legalistic, dead religion.**

But **all of those hopes and dreams had died along with Jesus at that awful, ugly place called Golgotha.** So the women were filled with feelings of helplessness and hopelessness.

They may even have said, *"Well, what can you expect? We should have known it would end this way."*

During this Lenten season at First Lutheran, we've looked at the ways in which our daily lives often seem like a journey through the wilderness.

We experience hardship and struggles. We know worry and disappointment. **Yes, of course, there are blessings;** happy times when we feel glad to be alive.

But every human being knows what it's like to feel as if they're **wandering alone in the wilderness.**

During Lent we've also seen how our God is always with us on the journey, whether we are aware of His loving presence or not.

And we've seen how God loves to surprise us along the way with **wonders: signs of His love.**

It's always been true, even back in Old Testament times. Just when we think we know what we can expect, **our God surprises us.**

We talked about some of those wonders: the **rainbow of promise** God flung into the sky for Noah; the **millions of stars overhead** reminding Abraham and Sarah that yes, they really would bear a child.

But this morning, we are confronted with the greatest surprise of all; the **most spectacular, unexpected wonder ever; the empty tomb and the promise given to the three women.**

Let's get back to them. **They knew what they could expect. Or at least, they thought they did.**

And, as the women draw near to the tomb, they suddenly remember that there's a huge rock over the entrance.

So now, on top of their deep sorrow, they're worried **they might not even be able to enter the tomb to do what they came to do.**

But, when they get there, lo and behold, the stone has been rolled away! This is the first clue that something amazing is about to be revealed. But the women don't seem to realize that in the stone that's been rolled away, **God has given them a wonder – a sign.**

That big stone can be **a metaphor for all the ways our God removes barriers and heavy burdens** from our lives.

Our Lord constantly goes ahead of us, removing the big stones that block our path, yet we usually just go blindly on, never thinking to give thanks and praise to him.

That's the way these women act when the stone has been rolled away.

Instead of realizing that God has opened a way for them into something new; they remain **focused on all that they're sure they can expect.**

They know what they'll find. A stiff, cold body wrapped in a shroud. He's been dead since Friday afternoon, so they know it won't smell too good in there.

They probably carry handkerchiefs to cover their noses and mouths, because, you see, **they know what to expect.**

They'll make their visit. Pay their respects. Do the anointing with the spices they'd brought.

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

And then for these three loving women, **life will go on as it has always gone on.**

That's what they expected.

The LAST THING THEY EXPECTED that morning when they went into that tomb was that **there would be no body.**

The last thing they expected was to see *"a young man, dressed in a white robe,"* telling them:

"Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here."

THEY WEREN'T EXPECTING THAT! But that's what happened.

And **the church has been telling this outlandish story ever since.** A story about something that we **never expected to happen in a million years...** ACTUALLY HAPPENING!

I know that some of you here this morning may **have a hard time believing this story.** That's okay.

But **I believe it.** I believe it **just as surely as I believe that I'm standing here this very moment.**

Throughout my 36 years of ministry, I've seen too many people **go to their deaths absolutely at peace not to believe it.**

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

I've seen too many people like that for me not to believe it.

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.**

But I do believe that the Almighty God **raised a dead-as-a-doorknob Jesus.** And in that incredible act, God takes our, **"Well, what can you expect?"** and **absolutely demolishes it** by doing the most unexpected thing imaginable.

He **defeats the powers of death and the devil and brings his son back to life on Easter morning.**

He turns death into life and tears into joy.

I do believe this story.

I'VE PUT ALL MY EGGS IN THE EASTER BASKET OF THIS STORY.

Call me gullible, but **I'll keep telling this story.** I'll tell it because the divine surprise of: **"He is not in the tomb. He is risen,"** makes all the difference in how we live our lives.

The wonder of: **"Christ is risen!"** gives us the power to **overcome our fears, handle the past and face the future.**

"Christ is risen!" gives people **eaten up with anger and the need for revenge** the **grace to forgive,** not because they're strong, but **because the risen Christ lives inside them.**

"Christ is risen!" gives people **holding on to sobriety by their fingernails** the hope that if God can raise Jesus from the dead, God might even be **able to raise drunks when they fall.**

"Christ is risen!" gives us the hope that **the way things have always been** WON'T ALWAYS BE.

Because, ever since Easter, THE RISEN CHRIST IS LOOSE IN THE WORLD.

Today, the young man in the tomb proclaims to the women and to us the **unexpected good news that Christ is alive.**

And then he **gives us a wonderful promise: "He is going before you."**

The risen Christ – who is **the power of everlasting life** – the Lord of new beginnings – **isn't just passively waiting for us in heaven.** No, he joins us on our continuing wilderness journey.

And **you can bet He'll show us some more of his wonders – divine surprises – along the way.**

What can you expect from the Jesus of Easter?

You can expect that He will always go before you, **rolling away stones right and left.**

But other than that, ALL YOU CAN EXPECT IS THE UNEXPECTED. Amen.