

Easter Sunday
Luke 24:1-12
Rev. Kelley L. Becker

24 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they went to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. ²They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³but when they went in they did not find the body. ⁴While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. ⁵The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. ⁶Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, ⁷that the Son of Man must be handed over to the hands of sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.” ⁸Then they remembered his words, ⁹and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. ¹⁰Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. ¹²But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

I read an article this week about managing expectations. The article’s target audience is pharmacists. You may be asking yourself why I was reading something written specifically for pharmacists. This is an excellent question, especially because I am, most definitely, not a pharmacist. Here’s a fun fact about your pastor...When I decide writing a sermon is too hard and I will never write another good one ever, I begin to research alternative vocations. This week, I wondered about being a pharmacist. So, on Wednesday, instead of working on my sermon, I learned the ins and outs of counseling patients who have been prescribed a new medication. Weirdly, it was fascinating.

The author wrote about the importance of helping patients manage their expectations of newly prescribed medication. They do this by reviewing, with patients, possible side effects that they might expect, and what those side effects might be. They talk to them about how they can expect feel. Sometimes medication causes patients to feel worse before they feel better. And pharmacists should also be able to tell their patients what kind of results to realistically expect

from the medication. Is it realistic to be pain free tomorrow or might it take several days to get some relief? Managing expectations.

I've learned that healthcare professionals spend a lot of time helping patients manage expectations. A month or so ago, Anna and I were cleaning some stuff off a high shelf here at the church. That kind of thing is something else I do when I am avoiding my real job. I was standing on a chair and pulled some small wooden chairs off the shelf. The chairs were broken and so they came down, not in an orderly fashion, but slipped out of my hands and landed on the right side of my face with considerable force. It was unpleasant. Since then, I have been seeing a black amoeba-y thing in my right eye. Fortunately, my eye doctor answers my panicked texts.

When I went to see her, she explained what she thought was going on and said it was likely that eventually the black thing in my field of vision would break up so it isn't as noticeable. And I said, "Fabulous! I will look forward to that." It turns out the key word was "eventually." Hearing my exuberance, she said, "To be clear, this will take months." She went on to explain, "So, for example, in May it will not be better." I think that was a nice way of saying, "Don't call me every week and complain about your vision." Managing expectations.

There are people who manage their expectations by keeping them low. I practiced this in seminary by assuming I was always going to fail. Ask Anna. It was super fun to be my friend in those days. What is it they say, "If you don't expect anything, you will never be disappointed." So, I don't blame Joanna and the two Marys and the rest of the disciples, after the week that had been though, for what they expected to find at the tomb. The week could not have gone worse. It ended in the brutal death of their friend. As the women approached the tomb, they had no expectation that they would encounter anything other than death.

Right before the story we read this morning, the author of Luke describes what happened immediately after Jesus' death. The women followed and watched as Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross, wrapped it in linen cloth, and laid his body in a tomb. In this gospel story, the text doesn't say a stone was placed over the entrance to the tomb, but it is safe to assume that's what happened. The purpose of putting a body in a tomb was to protect it, so the entrance would have been closed.

Since the women saw all of that, they would have expected: the stone to still be in place when they got there, their friend would still be dead, and his body would still be in the tomb. I wonder how they thought they would move the stone. I don't know how much a typical tombstone would have weighed, but the resurrection stories in the gospels only work if the stone being rolled away was not an easy thing to do. If it could have been easily moved, the tomb being open would not have been so startling, certainly not miraculous. For the women to approach the tomb and see it open was startling and troubling.

It probably didn't seem real to them that just a week before, they had seen Jesus boldly processing into Jerusalem, as they shouted, "Hosanna!" They had such high expectations for what was next. They thought it was the beginning of the revolution that would liberate them from the oppression of the Roman Empire. Something would finally change their lives for the better. But it was really the beginning of the end. They could sense it as the week went on. They could see and hear how Jesus was getting under the skin of the religious leaders who were looking out for themselves by collaborating with Roman political leaders. It all spun out of control so quickly. And he was gone.

When they saw the open tomb, they expected the worst. Either Jesus' body would be gone (because someone or something took it) or it may as well have been gone after what the animals likely had done to it. They walked into the tomb and their fears were realized. His body was gone. And just as they began to wonder what they should do next, "two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them." Naturally these dazzling divine dudes scared the women who bowed their faces to the ground. Those messengers from God asked them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?"

To be clear, the women were not looking for the living. They didn't have it in them to expect to find life that day. They expected only death. Maybe you know what it is like in the early days of grieving the loss of someone you love. Death and loss can easily overwhelm us. We wake up every day expecting more grief. We find ourselves still breathing and sleeping, and walking, and talking, but grief is everywhere.

You know, it occurs to me that ceasing to breathe isn't the only death there is. Death isn't just about termination of biological function at a time we hope is way off in the distance. We experience death all the time, right in the middle of our living, but you already know that don't you? You've mourned fractured relationships and unwanted separations. You've felt and been the recipient of hatred and bitterness. You've struggled with anxiety, addiction, and fear. You've heard the words malignant, terminal, and you have had to say good-bye too soon. You've experienced all kinds of loss and felt pain you didn't think you could bear.

As I've reflected this week on all the ways we experience death in this life, I began to think differently about the angels' question, "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" The answer is: We look for the living among the dead because we believe resurrection is real. Isn't that what being a follower of Jesus is about? Jesus saw so much promise in this life, so much that he sacrificed *his* life for it. His stories and his lessons were about how to LIVE. Jesus' whole purpose seemed to be wrapped up in his utter determination to bring light and life to the people he met so they could truly LIVE right now, right here.

As followers of Jesus, we are called to look for life and light, to find our way in a world that seems to deal more death than life at times. And we are called to help other people find their way too. But we human beings don't like to be disappointed. We don't like to look foolish or to be wrong. It seems so vulnerable to feel hopeful, but the truth is, hope is much more than a feeling. In his article for Sojourners Magazine, titled, "While the Men Were in Hiding, Women Delivered the Greatest News the World Has Ever Known," author and theologian Jim Wallis wrote,

[Hope] is a choice, a decision, an action based upon faith. Hope is the very dynamic of history. Hope is the engine of change. Hope is the energy of transformation. Hope is the door from one reality to another.

Things that seem possible, reasonable, understandable, even logical in hindsight — things that we can deal with, things that don't seem extraordinary to us — often seemed quite impossible, unreasonable, nonsensical, and illogical when we were looking ahead to them. The changes, the possibilities, the opportunities, the surprises that no one or very few would even have imagined, just become [part of]

history after they've occurred. What looked before as though it could never happen is now easy to understand.¹

It has happened over and over, not only historically, but personally, right? How many of you have ever made it through something you thought you couldn't or done something you thought was impossible? Look around. Surely it is time we raise our expectations.

*The news from the women at the tomb was unbelievably hopeful, and yet when they told the disciples, they called it, "Nonsense."
Hope unbelieved is always considered nonsense. But hope believed is history... [being made]. The nonsense of the resurrection story became the hope that shook the Roman Empire,²*
and is the reason any of us are trying to follow the ways of Jesus today.

It is not nonsense to believe that nuclear weapons are unnecessary, and that war is not just part of life. It is not nonsense to believe that a child's race and class and gender won't always determine their future share of happiness, security, and well-being. It is not nonsense to believe that people with deep divisions will one day sit down together and work it out. It is not nonsense to believe that after centuries of harming the environment, human beings can heal it. It is not nonsense to believe that one day the Church will care less about every knee bowing and every tongue confessing and more about every child thriving and the world made whole.

These are not nonsense thoughts. They are the seeds of hope. With this hope we can look into the eyes of the ones who are poor, the ones who are suffering, and the ones, in the words of author, theologian, and civil rights leader, Howard Thurman, "with their backs against the wall," and expect that justice will one day come. With this hope, together, we will learn to expect that our families and our neighbors and the generations to come will live in a place in which differences in skin color, culture, religious tradition, sexual orientation, gender identity, and ability are celebrated. And with this hope we will look forward to and expect the day when nations will not measure their security by their weapons, and status by

¹ <https://sojo.net/articles/while-men-were-hiding-women-delivered-greatest-news-world-has-ever-known>, accessed 4/7/23.

² <https://sojo.net/articles/while-men-were-hiding-women-delivered-greatest-news-world-has-ever-known>. Accessed 4/7/23.

the wealth of its leaders. *With this hope we can plan and sow and build and create visions and dreams. And with this hope we can find the faith and the courage to bear the cost of such possibilities.*³

Beloveds, if we want to reflect God in this world, we must manage our expectations. And we need to manage them up...way up because God has great expectations for what the world will be and who we will be. We, too, must have great expectations, we must expect that in a world in which it is easy to name all that is wrong, things will still go right. There is and will be beauty and art and music. There is and will be kindness and compassion and forgiveness. There sometimes is and will be justice and peace. These things are and will be because resurrection is real. Transformation is possible. Expect resurrection. Expect it every single day. I promise, if you expect it, you will experience it, and when you do, it will be you running from the tomb with the good news of life. And there will be people who say it's nonsense, but there will also be people, like good ole Peter, who will run to see it and they will find hope too.

[Because] Sometimes even though you know
the worst is happening,
even though you know
the inevitable outcome,

even sometimes when you have given up yourself...
...it doesn't work out as you expect.

There are those days when the child inside you,
who has been running away for years, without fail,
...doesn't.

The day when the one who was not born to fit in,
is finally accepted for who they are.
When the traveler,
for so long the outsider,
suddenly becomes a friend.

There are those days when,

³ All references to "nonsense" were inspired by the work of Jim Wallis.

in the face of despair,
for some unexpected and
incomprehensible reason,
our long dead hopes
are brought back to life.

There are those days
we suddenly realize
the stone has been moved...
... and the tomb is empty.

Original poem by Nigel Varndell, and published on the Sanctuary Centre website, edited for use in this sermon by
Rev. Kelley Becker

Keep looking for the living among the dead, dear ones. Resurrection is real and
love is alive! Alleluia! Amen.