

On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. ² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, ³ but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. ⁴ While they were wondering about this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them. ⁵ In their fright the women bowed down with their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, “Why do you look for the living among the dead? ⁶ He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee: ⁷ ‘The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, be crucified and on the third day be raised again.’ ” ⁸ Then they remembered his words.

⁹ When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. ¹⁰ It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. ¹¹ But they did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense. ¹² Peter, however, got up and ran to the tomb. Bending over, he saw the strips of linen lying by themselves, and he went away, wondering to himself what had happened. (Luke 24:1-12)

What Would We Expect?

The funeral service was very solemn – just as it should be. They wheeled the casket down to the front of the church. The family followed behind and filed into the front pews. I started the funeral liturgy and did the readings. Just as I was about to start the sermon, that guy in the box started banging on the lid and shouting, “Let me out of here!” Do you think that’s ever really happened to me? Of course not. I’ve been a pastor for a quarter of a century. I’ve officiated at dozens of funerals. Never once has that guy inside the box banged on the lid and demanded to be let out. And why not? Because dead is dead. It’s the most final thing in our experience. But Easter is the celebration of the end of endings. It’s God’s way of turning all our expectations upside down and giving us something that no one else ever could. So today we want to go back to that very first Easter morning and look again at this incredible event and try to learn better what it means. To get there, we’re going to ask ourselves, **what would we expect?**

I.

Would we expect what the women expected? On the first Easter morning, a group of women got up before the sun even rose and headed out of town to the tomb where Jesus lay. Luke says that they took the spices they had prepared. That tells us what they were going out there to do. Jewish burial customs at that time involved anointing the body with spices. Usually this was done right at the time the person was buried. But remember what had happened on Good Friday. Jesus died at about three in the afternoon. By the time they got permission to take his body down from the cross and then carried it to the tomb, and wrapped in strips of cloth, it was almost sundown. For Jews, the Sabbath day starts at sundown on Friday. According to Old Testament law, they could not do physical work on the Sabbath, not even giving someone they loved a proper burial. So Jesus didn’t get one. These women were heading out to the tomb to fix that.

That tells us exactly what they expected to find – a dead body. The only question they discussed as they headed out there was who was going to roll the stone away. So, they were surprised to find the tomb open. They ventured into the gloom and when their eyes adjusted to the dark, it was clear that Jesus’ body was gone. Luke says that they were wondering about this when the angels appeared. Even at that moment, the idea that Jesus was alive never even entered their heads. And can we blame them? Do you know anybody who truly died and then two or three days later, you saw them alive again? Death is final.

And it’s coming for all of us. I’ve reached the point in my life where almost certainly, I have less time left than I’ve already lived. This body is eventually going to give out. That’s true for even the youngest child among us. No matter how much youth and life our confirmands and graduates will have next month, death is eventually going to lay every one of them low. Why does death take such a terrible toll? It’s the result of sin. God actually created us to live with him forever, in a perfect, undying world. But Adam and Eve disobeyed the one command God gave them and they died. And death has been taking us human beings ever since. You and I will die not just because our bodies will get old and our immune systems will become compromised or because our heart muscles will wear out or even because we’ll get hit by a car years before all that happens. We’ll die because we’re sinners. We were born in sin and every single day, we commit actual sins. We lust. We hate.

We're jealous and ugly and selfish. We treat our spouses and our children like they're here to serve us instead of the other way around. We think the whole universe should revolve around us. All those things are sin. They condemn us to die, and even worse, to suffer hell afterwards.

But all that is why Jesus came. Easter celebrates God turning our expectation of dying upside down. Jesus lived a perfect life in our place. He never sinned in word or deed. He never even had a sinful desire or a sinful thought. He was totally perfect in every way. St. Paul says that the wages of sin is death. Our sin earns death for us. But what did Jesus earn? Nothing but life everlasting. Yet, he died. Not because he had to, but because he chose to. He let sinners nail him to a cross and kill him. He held back all the power of the Son of God and stayed on that cross. He let his Father inflict hell itself on him while he was there. He gave up his spirit and he died. All in our place. All to pay for our sin. That was Friday. Early Easter Sunday morning, before those dear women ever even got to that tomb, Jesus rose. He restored life and health to his body. He undid all the trauma of the nails and the whip and the hours hanging on a cross. He did something totally contrary to all human experience and expectation. He rose. That resurrection means that our sin is paid for. It no longer has a hold on these bodies. That resurrection is our receipt, our proof of purchase, that we can hold out to God himself to show that death doesn't get to keep us. We are now holy and perfect in God's sight. That surprise ending to Jesus' death means that we are free!

II.

But it wasn't a surprise ending for everybody. It wasn't even supposed to be a surprise ending for these women or for Jesus' disciples. Jesus had repeatedly told them what was going to happen when he got to Jerusalem. He promised to rise. He spoke about it so plainly that his enemies understood and asked Pilate to post a guard so that Jesus' disciples couldn't steal his body and claim he had risen. But his followers never got it. They kept thinking it was another parable. So, it never even entered the minds of these poor ladies that they were going out to an empty tomb. But the angels did know. They had a completely different set of expectations that morning. **What would we expect? Would we expect what the angels expected?**

While the women were standing there in the tomb trying to figure out what had happened, two angels appeared to them. They were a little tough on those ladies. They said, "**Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you, while he was still with you in Galilee.**" They clearly thought that these women should've expected Jesus to rise. To them, there simply was no doubt about it because that's what Jesus said was going to happen. To the angels, nothing is more certain than the word of God. All human experience, all expectations and logic and reason are nothing compared to the almighty word of the Lord.

Now to be fair, it was much easier for the angels to see it that way for the simple reason that they had no sin. They stand every day in the presence of almighty God. They see Jesus in all his glory and all their experience had told them that when God speaks, it happens. We don't have that same perspective. Down here on this earth, God hides himself. He works behind the scenes in the world as we know it. He often allows it to seem like his word isn't working. I remember telling a man once, "Jesus is ruling the world right now." You know what he said to me? "He's not doing a very good job!" The sad thing is, I could totally understand why he felt that way. There's so much sin in the world. There's so much hurt in this world. There are so many disasters and horrors in this world. How can Jesus let all that stuff go on?

God hides himself, for now. While we live in a sinful world, God tells us to trust that he is there working behind the scenes. God calls us to trust that he comes to us in things that seem to be empty and powerless – in words. Even the Bible tells us that a wise man is a man of few words. How many of us know people that talk and talk and act like they know everything about everything? What does all their chatter actually accomplish? To us, words mean nothing without deeds. But God's word is different. God has built the power of the Maker of the universe into his word. Jesus said that he would go to Jerusalem, be betrayed into the hands of sinners, die and then rise again on the third day. To the angels nothing else could be true. Nothing else should be true for us, either. Today, we have gathered here because we know that Jesus' word is true. Even today, there is no proof that Jesus rose. Even if they have correctly identified the tomb where Jesus lay, there is no forensic evidence there which a scientist could use to prove Jesus rose. No one was inside that tomb so there were no witnesses. All the testimony that he rose is contained in the Bible. But the Bible is God's word. And all that it is says is true. That power of God uses that word to give us faith, which then seizes that promise and believes it.

Jesus' resurrection makes a promise to us: we, too, will rise. Now, before Jesus returns, God promises that we will go to heaven. Those believers who have already left us are with Jesus today. If I'm your pastor on the day God calls you home, I will sit next to your bed and I will tell you that you are going to be with Jesus. That promise is absolutely true and it has the power in it to enable you to overcome the last great trial we face here. But it's not all that God did. Jesus didn't rise from the dead just so that we could live on in some other "plane of existence." He didn't only save our souls. Jesus died and he rose to save all that God created. He died and rose to save the world which has been broken by sin. He will remake it and we will live in the new heavens and the new earth, a new Eden. And these bodies will live again.

Does that seem like a good or a bad thing to you? As I've gotten into middle age, my body has started to have creaks and pains. My joints, especially, ache quite often. A friend of mine mocked me several years ago already because I have the font on my computer set to a very large setting to make it easier to read. I drive my wife crazy because I often only hear part of what she's saying to me. If God lets me live into my 80's or 90's, what is this body going to feel like? Will I be able to see at all? Or hear? Will I be able to walk, even with a cane or a walker? And how sharp will my mind be? Will I even recognize my children? Do I want to live like that for all eternity? No. But that's not what the resurrection means. We will rise and our bodies will be glorified. They will be made new and whole and perfect. We can't even imagine what God is going to give us because none of us has ever experienced having a glorified body or living in a perfect world. But that's what Easter promises us.

Those angels show us the attitude God want us to have: Jesus said all this, so it must be true. Jesus said it, so it doesn't matter what I can see with my eyes or what I have experienced in my life, or what logic or reason or science or human philosophy argue. Jesus speaks the truth and his words can never fail. How can I ever have a faith that trust like that? God has to give it to me. God has to grow it in me. He does that through the gospel. Every day that we live here, we are in God's faith nursery. Our celebration of Easter Sunday is another opportunity for the Holy Spirit to work through the gospel and teach us to know this is true. Today, Jesus comes to us again, in word and sacrament, in the power of God, and renews our trust in all that he promises.

My friends, the day is coming, when we will rise. We won't have to bang on the lid of our coffins and ask to be let out. We will hear the voice of our Savior and our graves will rip open and our bodies will live again. We will be made new and we will live with him forever. That is what today is all about. My friends, that's what this life is all about. God wants us to have that expectation: we will live, just as Jesus lives. Amen.