

“Living as Easter People: From Expectations to Experience”

Luke 24:1-12

New Revised Standard Version

What we experience in our lives is so often what we come to expect from our lives. It's human nature to get trapped in fatalistic thinking that “what has been, will always be.” Or maybe you don't tend to be fatalistic about things but you live your life pretty routinely, not expecting anything horrible to happen, but not expecting anything great to happen either. Or maybe you are an eternal optimist – but your optimism sometimes betrays you when reality doesn't match your dreams.

Well, my friends, Easter invites us to broaden our horizons...beyond fatalism, beyond optimism, and even beyond that place in the middle we sometimes call apathy or indifference. To live as an Easter people is to trust that there may yet be experiences beyond your own that point to a fuller understanding of how God works in the world. Easter invites us to look to THOSE experiences to help shape our expectations of what is

possible, rather than relying ONLY on what WE have experienced ourselves or ONLY on what WE want for ourselves. Because if we are only living in the world with eyes on ourselves, we will miss the resurrection. And not just on Easter day, but every day.

So let's turn to the women in today's text. Because I think through their eyes, we can see how this expansive vision works, and it may just be more attainable than you think. We CAN shift our expectations to create a different experience for ourselves, and our world.

This group of faithful female disciples whom we know from earlier in Luke's gospel—Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and “other women” (24:10)—go to Jesus' tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial. They have a completely routine, albeit gut-wrenching, job to do, one they have likely done

many, many times before.¹ Yet, in the midst of what they are expecting, they encounter the unexpected. They expect to see a body, but instead find an empty tomb. This is shocking; in no way were they expecting this.

Luke tells us that the women are perplexed, confused. My best guess is that they are saying to one another: *“Are you sure this was the right tomb? Third enclave from the left in the rock that is due east of the second tallest olive tree in the grove?”* You’ve had this conversation with people in your car when you’ve taken a wrong turn or with Siri when her directions do not lead to the destination you entered into your phone; you’ve had this convo in your own head when you can’t find what you’re looking for; you doubt your memory – *“you know, I thought this was the spot, but I guess it’s not.”*

The women in today’s text don’t even have a chance to

wander around and look at other tombs, as we might do to see if we are at least close to the right spot, before, lo and behold, messengers of God appear. And as biblical messengers of God are prone to do, these messengers appear suddenly and seemingly out of nowhere, causing fear and terror and probably some eye strain, what with their dazzling white outfits.

And the messengers do not so much tell the women something NEW as much as they REMIND the women of what they already knew but perhaps hadn’t fully understood until now. Echoing Jesus’ own prediction in Luke 9:22, the messengers ask the women to recall that this whole empty tomb thing is not as unpredictable as it might seem: *“Remember how Jesus told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be crucified, and on the third day rise again,”* (24:6-7).

¹ Michal Beth Dinkler, “Commentary on Luke 24:1-12,” *Working Preacher* (4 April 2021), accessed on 3 April 2021 at

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/resurrection-3/commentary-on-luke-241-12-7>.

The messengers do not make some grand elaborate proclamation about THE MIRACLE OF ALL MIRACLES having taken place; rather, they simply invite the women to REMEMBER. Remember how Jesus told you this would happen? Remember what he said? In other words, the women discovering an empty tomb is actually NOT UNexpected and it should not be a surprise; rather, if you have been following Jesus and listening to him this is to be EXPECTED.

It is perhaps the fact that the messengers know that this should not be NEW news to the women, that they ask, “*Why do you look for the living among the dead?*” (v5) Which honestly, is a little snarky in my opinion. These women aren’t looking for the living among the dead, they are looking for the dead among the dead!

But you see, in their question, the messengers reveal their presupposition, their working assumption: that the women already should KNOW the

message of Jesus; and believe that he meant what he said that “*on the third day he would rise.*” It is actually not an unreasonable assumption, all things considered. These women were some of Jesus’ closest friends; they would have no reason to not believe him. And actually, as soon as the messengers remind the women of the words of Jesus himself, Luke writes, “*then they remembered his words,*” (vs 8). It’s like the light bulb goes off: Poof!

And maybe this is what Easter is for us too. Every Easter we remember that “Oh yeah, Jesus did say he would rise. Oh yeah, we are supposed to proclaim, ‘Christ is Risen!’ Oh yeah, God is a God of grace and second chances and ‘One who does things beyond what we could ever ask or imagine,’ thank you Apostle Paul.” I mean, how many years have you been going to church and singing, *Christ the Lord is Risen Today* and yet found yourself three or four months later, or even three or four hours later, forgetting

that Christ is, in fact, still alive and at work in the world?

Now, to our knowledge, the women in Luke's gospel had only heard from Jesus three times that he would rise. I'll let you count up how many times you've heard it over your lifetime, but I'm guessing it's more than three. So we can cut the women some slack here. We ALL need to be reminded that Christ is Risen, that we are EASTER people – people of resurrection, not people of resignation.

We come to expect to see death, especially in a graveyard. But Luke's Jesus, once again, wants to open our eyes to see what we are not seeing. And ironically, Jesus instills this sight by not physically being there for the women to see. The women could not SEE the body of Jesus, and so they thought he was gone. But the messengers remind them about what they had heard from Jesus, and how what they had heard should inform how they see in the world and how they interpret

what they see. In other words, if the women live not by just their own life experiences, but if they shape their expectations on what Jesus told them would happen – then NOT seeing Jesus' body in the tomb would not mean that he is absent forever, it would mean that he is forever present in the world in a whole new way.

Maybe the resurrection is not about believing something new and UNexpected as much as it is REMINDING one another and REMEMBERING how God has ALWAYS acted in the world and in our lives.

Jesus' resurrection points to the cycles of death and life and rebirth we see in nature each and every year. Since Creation, God has always been a God of renewing and rejoining. God continually worked with the Israelites, creating new covenants and giving them second chances. Jesus continues this legacy: healing people's ills, forgiving their sins, giving them a new lease on life to live with abundance and not scarcity, hope and not

fear, forgiveness and not shame.

You see, when we focus only on the “miraculous” nature of Jesus’ resurrection we may miss the fact that God has been trying to show us the gift of resurrection from the beginning of time, and still to this day. Resurrection is not contrary to how God works in the world, or even an exception to how God usually works in the world, resurrection is the HEART of who God is and how God works! Resurrection, rising up to life after death, raising up hope in the midst of defeat, this is second nature to God; and if we’re created in the *imago dei* – the image of God – when will it become second nature to us as well? When will we wake up each and every day expecting and looking for resurrection and renewal and new life instead of waking up and resigning ourselves to the way things are?

I’m reminded of the beloved, late poet Mary Oliver whose instructions for living were

threefold: “*Pay attention. Be astonished. Tell about it.*”

We are an EASTER people, so let’s live with the expectations of Easter – the expectation that says death does not have the last word. The expectation that says, like Jesus, we can rise up in the world and create experiences in our lives that are rooted in love and hope, and not in fear or hate. We can rise up and not let the powers of the empire of our day defeat the good news of God. We can rise up out of the relentless trappings of depression and addiction, or when we can’t do it on our own, we can raise our hands, and ask for someone to journey with us and help us rise up – no matter how long it takes. We can raise our voices each and every time we see something that is trying to crucify hope or dignity or love in our world and say – no, THAT is not the final word; you may be speaking that now, but on the third day, on the third day – that word is replaced with a new one. A word of equity, of justice, of peace, of liberation, of healing,

of shalom; a word, indeed of life everlasting – not just in the hereafter but in the here and now.

You see, when our vision is only based on our own experiences, it is limited, and that limited vision has an uncanny power to shape our expectations; and it's so easy to forget about the power and presence of resurrection in the world. The news does not report on resurrection, does it? But the Bible speaks of resurrection. And our lives are living testimonies that proclaim resurrection. So what are we listening to? What are we tuning in to?

With the world as it is, it is far too easy to get used to living in pain and grief, in war and division, in hate and strained relationships. We expect death. We expect bad news. We resign ourselves to the way things are, without even intentionally meaning to. We just gradually stop trying and one day wake up and realize – wait a minute – this is not how the world is supposed to be – this is not the

vision God gave to us for how we are to be in the world as God's people.

Could it be that resurrection is about raising us up out of our resignation of “how things are” and “how they have always been” so that we can re-imagine along with God what they could be? What WE could be? What if resurrection is about realizing, as Jesus did in and through his death and rising on the third day, that there is a world in which pain and grief can TRANSFORM us rather than debilitate us, INSPIRE us rather than dis-illusion us?

And if this is sounding Pollyanna-ish, notice that unlike other divine messengers in scripture, the messengers in this text do not tell the women to NOT be afraid. Their fear can exist. Their grief can be real. AND. The messengers help them remember that resurrection is a reality that they, too, can expect and experience. And in fact, that they are experiencing in this very moment.

I wonder how long it would have taken them to realize that what they were experiencing was resurrection without the messengers? Do we recognize the divine messengers of God among us who are raising our gaze, who are raising us out of one way of thinking into a broader perspective, who are reminding us and showing us resurrection again and again? (And hint hint: divine messengers do not have to be dressed in dazzling white; they can be as mundane as your next door neighbor, as delightful as your grandchild, as expected as your pastor or mentor, and as unexpected as the person across the political aisle from you). It's less about the messenger, and more about our receptivity to the message – of trusting that what we so often deem UNbelievable or UNexpected is in fact how we SHOULD expect God to be working in the world and in our lives.

You know, every other time that the women had taken spices to anoint a body in burial, I bet the body had been there. So when they came

Jesus' tomb, it's not that their expectations were wrong or that their previous experiences were invalid – it's just that those previous experiences which led them to develop their expectations WERE NOT the full picture of what was possible. And friends, Jesus came and died and rose so that you and I COULD see the full picture of what is possible.

The unbelievable may never become believable for us (logically speaking), but it still can be transformational. It was for the women. They quickly pass on what they have seen and heard to the other disciples; but the disciples think the women are telling an idle tale. “Fake news,” they say, not willing to allow someone else's experience or story to shape their understanding of the world, and they decide, in that moment, to rely just on what THEY have always known to be true in the past.

But, the good news of resurrection is that it is not a one-time thing. All of the gospel stories of Easter reveal a

gradual understanding of the resurrection. The way we celebrate Easter with so much excitement (which has the effect of whiplash after Holy Week and Good Friday) is not actually how Easter unfolded. It took years for the disciples to fully understand it, and accept it, if they ever did. I mean look at the responses in today's text –of how some disciples believed it to be an idle tale and how Peter needed to go and see for himself to believe.

The fact that Luke's gospel includes ALL of these experiences and responses to the resurrection should give us hope. What we cannot buy into today, maybe we will come to believe tomorrow. Faith is not a fixed formula; faith is a formation process.

The resurrection story makes room for all of us: those who believe and proclaim (the messengers); those who need reminding before proclaiming; (the women); those who are not ready to believe or cannot understand or see yet (the disciples); and those who must

experience something for themselves in order to believe it (Peter).

If you hear nothing else today, hear this: wherever you are on the BELIEVING journey, know that you BELONG in this story, because you BELONG to GOD, and THAT belonging is enough to allow you to go into the world and live as an Easter people, proclaiming Christ is Risen in whatever ways that you can.

“Believing” in the empty tomb on Easter morning is not the point. Jesus is not in the empty tomb, and so the empty tomb is not our ultimate goal or our final destination.. You can stay as long as you want sitting in that empty tomb perplexed, but eventually Jesus wants us to join him out in the world; so bring along your confusions and questions – Jesus welcomes them! But step out of the tomb. Jesus will meet you wherever you are on the journey. Today, right now, Jesus is calling to you and to me, to step out of the tombs that we are want to stay in and step into the world

he is calling us to create. Jesus needs us to move from our expectations of finding him in the tomb to believing his experience of being alive and at work out in the world and in us.

This year has brought death and disease painfully front and center in our lives. And yet the beauty of the good news is that death does not have to go away in order for resurrection to happen. In fact, resurrection happens in and through death. Resurrection doesn't happen when everything is happy and great and life is good. Resurrection comes when our grief is guttural, when our disillusionment is at an all time high, when skepticism sneaks up on us, when we feel like all we hear is idle tales or fake news.

The GOOD NEWS of Easter is that even if we can't see resurrection around us, it doesn't mean that it's not happening. We must be for one another, the messengers who remind each other that Christ is Risen.

Living as an Easter People is not about blindly believing the unbelievable. Rather, living as an Easter People is about changing our expectations so that the unbelievable becomes more believable because of the ways we are living our lives and changing the world. How we experience and share God's love in the world matters. Because each and every time we do so, we not only experience resurrection ourselves, we make it a reality in the world, and therefore change what other people will come to expect in the world. That is gospel; that is good news; and that is what we remember and proclaim and ENACT when we say, Christ is risen. He is Risen indeed.

Amen.