

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

March 31, 2013

Easter Sunday

Luke 24:1-12

Creed 8

...on the third day he rose again from the dead...

Expectations – Expectations have everything to do with how we experience the world around us and the events we encounter. Sometimes our expectations will miss the mark and we'll be surprised – either for the better or for the worse. Other times our expectations can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy and we'll get just what we thought we'd get.

But don't you love it when things turn out better than you expected?
The party you thought would be boring, ends up being quite fun.
The test you thought would be so hard, ends up being a breeze.
The cost estimate on your car repair is less than \$200.
The difficult conversation you were nervous about goes really well.
The project with the impossible deadline gets done on time (and under budget!).
The dire prognosis doesn't come to fruition, and there is healing instead.

The unexpected happens!

When they laid Jesus in the tomb, he was dead – really dead. And they didn't expect him to rise. When the women went on Sunday morning, they had with them the spices and perfumes for tending to a corpse.

Even though Jesus had predicted his death...and resurrection...several times – telling his disciples that this was coming, no one greets the news that God has raised Jesus from the grave and defeated death and the devil by saying, "Praise God!" No one shouts "Hallelujah" when they hear that their friend and Lord has been raised to life. And absolutely no one, upon hearing the news that death itself could not hold the Lord of Glory captive, says, "I knew it – just like he said!"

That's right – no one expects resurrection and no one, quite frankly, believes it at first. This is true for all the different stories of Jesus' death in the Bible, and it is certainly the way it goes as Luke tells it this morning. The women come to the tomb expecting to anoint Jesus' dead body. That is, they have no expectation that he has been raised. In fact, only when they are reminded by the "two men in dazzling clothes" do they recall Jesus' promise.

Energized and excited by this encounter, they run back to tell the rest of the disciples...who greet their announcement with utter skepticism. In fact, Luke says that those who received the testimony of the women regarded their message as an "idle tale." That's actually a fairly kind translation of the Greek word *leros*. That word, you see, is the root of our word "delirious." So in short, they thought what the women said was crazy, nuts, and utter nonsense.

And, quite frankly, who can blame them? I mean, resurrection isn't simply a claim that Jesus' body was resuscitated; it's the claim that God entered the stage of human history in order to create an entirely new reality all together. Which, quite frankly, can be frightening.

We expect the dead to stay dead. I mean, if the dead don't stay dead, what can you count on? Resurrection, seen this way, breaks all the rules, and while most of us will admit that the old rules aren't perfect, at least we know them. They are predictable, a known quantity, and in this sense comforting. We get used to sadness, disappointment and despair. And resurrection upsets all of that.

Resurrection, in other words, throws off the balance, upsets the apple cart, and generally turns our neat and orderly lives totally out of whack. Which is why I think that if you don't find resurrection at least a little hard to believe, you probably aren't taking it very seriously!

And, truth be told, I suspect that's where some of us are – we've heard the story of resurrection so often it hardly makes us blink, let alone shake with wonder and surprise. Which is rather sad, when you think about it, because this promise, as difficult as it may be to believe initially, is huge, and when it sinks in and lays hold of you, absolutely everything looks a little different.

Finding the resurrection hard to believe puts us in good company with those who were closest to Jesus and who were the first to hear about it. But let's struggle to believe in it because of what it means, rather than a thoughtless dismissal because it doesn't square with rational thinking.

Recognize with me the incredible scope and titanic implications of God raising Jesus from the dead, and in doing so creating a new reality – overthrowing death, sin and all that would oppress us; and declaring once and for all that life is more powerful than death, and love more enduring than tragedy.

I wonder if the church has at times mischaracterized the nature of religious faith – that is, what believing looks like. I wonder if the impression out there is that perfect faith conquers all doubt. This is certainly NOT true – especially of the people in the Bible and those who wrote the Bible.

In the Bible, faith and doubt are woven quite closely together. Doubt, questions, skepticism even, are not the opposite of faith, but are essential ingredients of it. Faith, after all, isn't knowledge. Faith is, according to the Bible (Hebrews 11:1), “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And so perhaps today we should not worry so much about understanding the mystery of the resurrection, but rather allow ourselves to be inspired to hope and believe that it's true.

Others of us, though, may find the resurrection easy to believe in, and have perhaps believed it and nothing else for our whole lives. We also do well to pause today to consider more deeply the radical and life giving implications of this event.

Death – what should be final and complete – does not have the last word.

Fear – which can cripple and destroy a person – is overcome.

Hate – which can infect a mind and spread like a virus – shrinks in the face of love.

Anything is possible with God.

Resurrection faith came slow to most of the disciples. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus takes a lot of faith and courage. But it is more than simply saying yes to the claim made by the women and, eventually, the men in the Easter story.

It is at the same time saying “no” to the power of death and destruction that surrounds us. In place of the bad news we hear and the bad experiences we have, we make the claim that there is a sustaining power, God, who brings life out of death and reconciliation out of conflict.

Since the women that first Easter morning, there has been unending testimony through the ages that that is so. To commit ourselves now, in our time and place, to their claim opens the door to new life for ourselves and for acts of love and reconciliation in the world – in ways we could never have expected.

Take a moment now to think about something difficult in your life, a situation causing you distress – maybe a new stress or a burden of a lifetime. Now imagine a resolution, a reconciliation, a healing – how you would **like** things to turn out.

What the resurrection will mean for you is probably something OTHER than that. Because when God acts, it will probably be NOT as we expect. But too often we are so focused on what we want that we miss what God is up to.

Christ has risen for us. The point of his resurrection is to produce our own, by putting love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more strength in our spines. Christ is risen to convert us, not from this life to some other life, but from something less than life to the possibility of full life itself. (William Sloane Coffin, Jr.)

In 1930, in the then Soviet Union, a prominent Communist, Nikolai Bukharin, went to Kiev to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd he aimed his attack at Christianity hurling insult, argument, and proof against it. An hour later he was finished. He looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of people's faith. "Are there any questions?" Bukharin demanded.

Deafening silence filled the auditorium. But then one man approached the platform, mounted the lectern and stood near the communist leader. He surveyed the crowd first to the left then to the right. Finally he shouted the ancient greeting known well in the Russian Orthodox Church: "CHRIST IS RISEN!" En masse the crowd arose as one and the response came crashing back like the sound of thunder: "HE IS RISEN INDEED!"

Hard to believe. But I do.

Expect the unexpected – even the resurrection of Jesus – and you will find it.

Thanks be to God!

Amen!