

THE RESURRECTION OF OUR LORD

EASTER SUNDAY

Easter Expectations: Life after Death

John 19:41 (NIV)

⁴¹ At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid.

You have come to a Lutheran Church on Easter Sunday morning. What did you expect before you even entered the doors today? Did you expect that there would be a lot of people and that you might not get the best parking spot? Did you expect good food, laughter, smiles, fun, fellowship – simply a good time and an uplifting experience? Did you expect a traditional service with classic hymns that you sang as a child, people to be dressed in their Sunday best, and the pastor to be wearing his pastor robes like a good traditional pastor would do? Whatever you specifically expected, the common denominator is that you expected an Easter Sunday church service – one that is bright, cheery, and happy. Easter Sunday is a great day, a day full of rejoicing and happiness!

What I'm assuming you didn't expect walking into this church on Easter Sunday would be for the church to be dank and dark, no lights turned on, everything draped in black, black cloth hanging from the cross, and everyone dressed all in black with black veils with frowns, tears, and sobbing. You did not come this morning expecting a funeral service.

If you were here this past Friday, though, you would almost expect those things. Every Good Friday we have what's called a Tenebrae service, a worship service of darkness. We go through the seven phrases that Jesus spoke from the cross while he was dying. After each phrase, we extinguish one of the candles up front and dim the lights in the sanctuary a little bit. By the end, the sanctuary is in complete darkness. It's a service that brings tears to your eyes because you are experiencing all over again Jesus' suffering and death. More tears come as you realize that it's my sins that put Jesus on that cross. I am the reason that he is dying. Because of my sins, I basically I lifted the hammer that struck the nails into him to that cross. He is dying the death that I should die.

I wonder, if that was the only church service you ever went to, if that was your introduction to Christianity, would you want to come back? In many ways, that service is so dark and depressing. If that was all you knew about God, would you ever even want to come back on Sunday for this Easter thing that these Christians talk about?

Now, what if you were one of the women who watched Jesus being crucified on the cross? What if you saw him bow his head and die on Friday? When you come back on Sunday, what do you expect to see?

The place where Jesus was crucified was called Golgotha, a name that literally means "place of the skull." There was a skull shaped into the side of the hill, and there were tombs in that same place, including the tomb where Jesus' body was laid. Imagine walking up to the place of the skull when dawn breaks on Sunday morning. A mist hangs in the air and grey clouds block the sun from shining on you but gives you enough light to see. As you get nearer, you see through the mist that skull made of rock on the side of that hill. The sunken shapes of the eye and nose sockets, the white plaster-y look of the forehead, the stones that jut out from the base that look like crooked teeth ready to fall out. This is an intimidating, unfriendly, unwelcoming place. This is a place of death. There is no happiness here, only grief and mourning and sadness.

The women coming to look at Jesus' tomb on that first Sunday after Jesus died on the cross on Friday would be going through much the same things you go through when you come to the funeral home days after your loved one has passed away. You know it's the right thing to do, to go to the funeral, to pay your respects, to talk to all the people mourning. You know there is going to be people wearing black, expressing their sorrow with their clothing. You expect it to be a hard day, an emotional draining day. But this is what you do after someone you love has passed away.

How many times have you gone through that? What is there to look forward to on the third day after someone you love has passed away? You know your emotions are going to be all over the place. You may not have been able to process the event yet. You may know that you will be processing the event for quite some time. It's a day you just try to push through so that you can get it into your past and you can move on in life, dealing with your sorrow so that you can begin your healing.

You can imagine that this is what Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and the other women who were with them were thinking as they approached Golgotha to find Jesus' tomb. Let's just get this done. Let's do what we know is right so that we can start moving on and healing.

If you came to church today with that attitude, then I failed at giving you a good expectation of what Easter Sunday is all about. Hopefully, if you had come to church today and saw everyone in black, everyone crying, you would think, "This is weird. What's wrong with these people? Don't they know what today is about?" Or maybe you would quietly wonder, "Who died?" and try asking someone who looks as befuddled as you if they know what's going on.

Your expectations of this Sunday are different from any other time that someone has died. At any other time, you would expect a funeral. You would expect, like the women were expecting, to see a place of death. Not today. Today is about someone doing something completely different over anyone else in human history. You came here on the third day after this Jesus person died, not to see someone dead, but to see and worship someone who is alive.

Today, someone who was dead lives. Someone who was witnessed as being dead, buried in a tomb, guards posted so that no one could steal his body from the tomb, had come back to life. An angel had come and rolled back the stone that had sealed the tomb. His appearance was like lightning. His clothes were as white as snow. The guards were scared for their lives. They shook and fell to the ground, petrified. And the angel waited there for the women.

As those women rounded Golgotha hill, the skull in the rock went out of their peripheral vision. The grey clouds lifted. The sun dispersed the mist. Then there was a garden. There was green. There flowers were blooming, still dripping from the morning dew. The colors are brilliant: purples, blues, oranges, reds. There is life here today! "At the place where Jesus was crucified, there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb, in which no one had ever been laid." (John 19:41) Opposite the place of the skull, was a vastly different scene. On the other side of Golgotha hill was a garden, full of was life. It's not what you would expect to be near the place of the skull, a place where criminals were crucified. There was life in a place marked for death.

There the angel announced the unexpected. "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay." (Matthew 28:5-6) We should expect to be at a funeral today, but that's not what the women found. The women found life in the place of death. The angel gave them this wonderful news that Jesus had come back to life. We are not here today for Jesus' funeral. We are here for the exact opposite. We are here because Jesus lives! We came here today not because a man died, but because he came back to life.

Jesus' resurrection from the dead means that his whole life, everything that he was here to do, his whole mission to substitute his life for ours to save us from our sins and give us eternal life was accomplished. God the Father put his stamp of approval on his Son's life and mission with Jesus' resurrection. The payment was accepted in full. Jesus has taken away your sins. He died taking that punishment from you. He rose from the dead as a preview of the life that he has given to each and every one of us here today. Jesus brought life from death. That place of the Skull, Golgotha hill, is not just a place of death. We have rounded that hill to see that same garden, that same green, those same brilliant colors, that same life that Jesus shows us he has given us by rising from the dead.

The angel sent the women on their way telling them to pass this message on to Jesus' disciples. Tell them that you didn't find death here at Golgotha, the place of the skull. Instead, you came to the garden on the other side of the hill where Jesus' tomb was. You found that tomb empty because Jesus Christ has risen today, just as he said that he would. You are going to see him again. You will see him in Galilee. That one who was crucified, died, and was buried, has risen from the dead. Jesus lives. Your Jesus lives. He has conquered death for you. He has brought life from death!

The women rushed off to tell Jesus' disciples. To their great surprise, Jesus met them on the way. With all their expectations of that day being shattered, all they could do was fall at his feet, clasp him, worship him. Jesus reassures them to not be afraid. I know this was unexpected, to see me alive, but go and tell my brothers. Tell them that they will not see me dead but alive!

By the grace of God, you came here today and you expected the unexpected. You came to this church today expecting to find life even though all our past experiences told us that we should find this person, this Jesus, still dead. You have come to believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That's why you didn't fear running into a funeral procession here this morning. You knew that you would come today to worship a risen Lord and Savior. Jesus has brought life from death, not just for himself, but for us as well.

Today, we have the joyous privilege of expecting the unexpected. We came here this morning to worship a risen Lord and God! We revel in hearing that news once again: Jesus Christ has risen today! Alleluia and Amen!