

“This Is Not What We Had In Mind”

Luke 24:1-12

4/15/2001 Easter Sunday – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

On that Sunday morning, two thousand years ago, Mary Magdalene, Joanna and the Mary (who was the mother of James) had experienced enough horror and grief to last a life time. They had just watched their best friend, the most holy One they had ever met, horribly tortured to death and they had assisted in interning His battered corpse in a tomb. They were in no hurry and all they were able to do was move their own bodies along in their state of sheer exhaustion. It was as if they were in a trance. They had to keep talking to each other to convince themselves that they were alive and not dreaming.

As they were entering into the tomb area, Mary changed the conversation to something practical – how would they find a person strong enough to open the tomb for the anointing ritual. But they met with something unspeakable. To their confusion and horror, they found that the tomb had already been opened and there were two Beings there – dazzling in appearance. These Beings had a look of ferocity, a look of nobility and an appearance of gentility all at the same time.

The women immediately became self-conscious and in the stark reality of their presence, they fell to the ground, so afraid, that they shook uncontrollably. They thought they might die within seconds.

But the voice they heard was a mixture of command and delight. “He is not here, He is risen as He said, just as you remember how He told you when you were in Galilee. Go tell the others.” And instantly these celestial Beings vanished before their eyes.

They had all they could do to get back on their feet. Within the hour, they were back in

Peter’s home, trying to make sense of what they thought they experienced.

When Mary Magdalene, who had lagged behind the others, came in later with an even more bizarre story about actually talking with Jesus, the eleven thought they had heard enough. “This is bordering on bad taste,” one of them might have snapped.

With such a preposterous story, the women were not believed. This sort of thing doesn’t happen. This is not what one would logically expect. Within only a few days of having been with One – Who had seemingly exhibited divine power– their expectations had been dashed to the ground, buried with the Man they had thought would lead them and their nation to better times.

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We like to order our world and plan our lives around predictability. We rush to be on time for an appointment or go to the store to buy food according to the instructions on a recipe. We attend a funeral of someone who is actually dead but in all we do, we fully plan on reality continuing as it had been. We do not expect God to care about us so much that God would come to us, experience our joys and sorrows, even love us enough to go through death and yet conquer death. Something like this is not what we would expect – even though God is the Creator of the universe.

In one sense, no matter how much the prophets may have predicted about this sort of thing, it is too much for us to comprehend. “This week, we’ve got to take the kids to the orthodontist, bake some cookies for the scout fund raiser, help set up for the church pot luck dinner and you’re asking me to believe that the Almighty Creator of the universe is with me, cares about me

and plans on being with me for eternity – beyond the point when my body gives out from under me? This is not what I had in mind.” Taking God and Christ seriously is too much.

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Admittedly, some years we come to the Easter service at our local church just for the family. “It is Easter and, you know, the church is pretty lucky to have me here so consistently every year. But I’m no hypocrite. I’m not some do-gooder who pretends to be God’s right hand person by showing up in church every Sunday. But asking me to take the reality of Jesus coming back from death, seriously, well isn’t that pushing it a little?”

“Now I’ll be a good sport and cheerfully go along with the family. Sure I’ll sing the song: ‘Jesus Christ is risen to day,’ it has a catchy tune, but where is my wrist watch? I thought it was in the dresser drawer this morning. I hope I didn’t lose that thing. Now I won’t be able to time the sermon.”

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In some ways, talking about Jesus coming back from the dead is so bizarre that it is like being transported to the television game show and the host, who has an abnormally wide smile, comes up to you and picks you out of the studio audience and says: “How would you like to trade that ball point pen in your pocket for what is behind curtain number one?” And the curtain opens up and a mighty wind envelopes you and there is a bright light that hurts your eyes. A Being (both frightening and beautiful) drifts through the air and suddenly towers before you and as you gasp in disbelief, in fright but with relief, this Being calls your name and says, “All this is true – what you have been hearing about (ever since your childhood Sunday School classes). I have been with you all your life. You don’t have to worry about dying. All you have to

do is get on with living and know that I am with you always and I deeply care about you.”

You see, the disciples were close to Jesus all those months but they had somehow missed the reality of the presence of God. It wasn’t something they expected.

And the women: they had been close to Jesus and the last thing they ever dreamed of, that morning, was that something other than the normal burial and mourning procedures would be followed. But as they were reminded of what Jesus had taught them, they inwardly said to themselves: “Now why didn’t I see this coming? But then that’s not what I expected.”

Other realities are closer to us than we think.

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In our home, we have moved the clothes washer and dryer up from the basement into a room on the first floor. This saves having to run down and up stairs to put loads in, obviously making for easier washing. In the morning, between breakfast tasks, we can start a wash load and if we are around long enough, put it in the dryer before we go off for the day.

Having the clothes washing appliances up on the first floor also means that you’ve got to have the detergent and fabric softener in that proximity as well. For a long time we have been putting the liquid detergent and the fabric softener in sleek plastic pitchers out in sight in that room. They look better than the large yellow jugs with all the advertising on the side.

One of the drawbacks of these nicer-looking containers is that they occasionally tip over. There’s also liquid usually dripping down their sides since we are pouring their contents into small measuring cups. It gets on your hand but yes, it isn’t one of the world’s most pressing problems. In fact, some of you have commented on the pleasing and familiar aroma of my cologne.

The truth is I don't wear cologne – it's Downy that I'm frequently spilling on myself.

Well, after a couple of years of using this method of storing the detergent and fabric softener, I made a discovery. I was standing by the washer, one day, emptying the entire contents of a new detergent jug into one of these pitchers and I was noticing how cleverly they had designed the detergent container. They have a no-drip collar that enables the top to be inset within the structure of the jug, catching the downward flow of the left over liquid from inside the built-in measuring cup that also serves as a cup. No muss, no fuss.

As I looked at this container design I said to myself: "They've probably paid the nation's top inventors millions of dollars to research and produce this device in order to market their product." Undoubtedly it cost Leaver Brothers more money for the packaging than the product (as is often the case in marketing).

So in thinking about this, it came to me. "Why can't I benefit from this technology and use the no-drip container myself instead of smelling like Downy all day long?" Here was technology right in front of me and I hadn't taken advantage of it for all this time. Why didn't I think of that? *So near and yet so far.*

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And the answer to that is much like the rest of our lives. We usually feel that life, at any given moment, is about as good as it is going to get. "No," we tell ourselves, "we can't expect things to change *for us.*"

And yet God sent us the very best. God has personally come to us and is present with us and yet we deny it. "No, God, that's not what we have in mind." Throughout history, people have always been saying "no" to God.

It was the Hebrew religion and the Roman justice system that nailed Jesus to the cross. The

best power structures of humanity said a blazing "no" to Jesus and obviously meant it.

"No Jesus, You're not what we had in mind. We expected You to take over Herod's governor's mansion and mass an army. Power is where it's at and all You are is some nonviolent protestor with a rag tag band of doubtful followers traipsing after you. You have the worst public relations department and advisory board in history. Even Your followers turned and ran out of town."

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But the resurrection is God's "yes" to our culture's "no." God said "yes" to all that we had denied. In the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, God gave an eternal "yes," an eternal validation to the very things that we just didn't have in our Day-Runner Calendar systems. What we had denied and refused to put into our outlook on reality, God affirmed and put in the bedrock stuff of the universe.

The resurrection of Jesus meant the death of all the expectations of the world which teach us that things will *not* improve. While the rest of the world was trying to have a Certs encounter or recognize Herb at Burger King, Jesus came back from the dead, for heaven's sakes, and it was so weird, so eerie, so unexpected and so profound – that the disciples didn't believe it. Not even if the news was coming from these women who were their lifelong friends. It, most certainly, was not what they expected.

When the two Marys and Joanna were given the good news, they were not treated as messengers as if their only task was to inform the others back home. They were reminded of what they had previously learned. They were treated as disciples, in and of themselves, and they were actually the first Christian missionaries in history. They remembered and grasped the reality, that though this is not what they were willing to let

themselves believe – it was true and it had been predicted by Jesus Himself.

The good news from these Beings was not that they were giving away a couple of front row tickets to a stage show, in the city auditorium, in which a magician would come back from the dead for the final act. This good news was about their friend Jesus, Someone with Whom they had been close. It had to do with Someone Whom they had come to know and be known by. It was about One Who had brought them closer to God than ever before so that their lives were forever changed. He had come back from death and the relationship, that they never expected to continue, was continuing.

It was a power right in their midst, so close to them, yet they had missed it by a mile. It was not what they expected.

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We need God's power in our lives and even though we usually do not expect God to be able to improve our lives, we dare not miss it. Every day, we live in community with these other Christians. We usually don't expect much and we get depressed, anxious, full of stress and at times, we feel utterly hopeless.

But there is a power that we are near and the only reason we forget about it is because it is not what we had in mind. The power, about which I speak, is the presence of God and God's love for us. The power is the reality of God's Spirit Who sometimes manages to remind us that there is more to life than ordering Easter lilies, little league, master card or keeping our cars on the road.

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What I challenge you to do with the resurrection of Christ is either take it or leave it. I think, if you don't believe in it, you should once and for all say you don't believe it and stop the

nonsense of singing about someone's resurrection if it has no meaning in your life.

Or you should take the truth of the resurrection and own it as your own. If you believe that God in Christ has come to establish a relationship with you, place that powerful truth at the center of your life. It's like you heard before, back when you were a kid in Sunday School. The teachers may have had little felt characters in their bathrobes and sandals plodding around on the flannel board. But back then, God's Spirit was speaking to you through those stories and those times of teaching.

It is nothing new but for one reason or another, you may not have had the time or the inclination to take it seriously. But this year, maybe at this point in your life, you are finally going to let God get through. Make it now that you raise your expectations for your life and say to God, "I don't know what to expect from You but I'm willing to be more open for You than I have been in the past."

Let go of the American god of reason and predictability and the gods of appearances and propriety. Commit your life to experiencing the power of God's love. Jesus came back from the dead to continue God's love and consistency of relationship with those people and with us.

So what are you going to do about your relationship with God? What do you expect God can do in your life? Because what you expect may not be what God has in mind.

Open yourself up to God and watch your life flourish. Your God is too much and you should be expecting great things. Expect to be

surprised. 🐼