

“Unexpected Easter Moments”

“You are witnesses of these things.”

The Easter Gospel is filled with unexpected moments:

The women who came to the tomb *“very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen”* (Mark 16:2) expected to find the body of Jesus where it had been laid following his death on Good Friday, and expected to prepare his body for its burial with the spices they bought. But when they arrived at the tomb, they discovered a most unexpected sight: the stone had been rolled back, and a young man in a white robe informed them that *“he has been raised; he is not here.”* (16:6). Startled by this unexpected moment, the women *“went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”* (16:8).

Unexpected moments ...

Mary Magdalene was one of the women who came to the tomb expecting to find Jesus’ body, only to be greeted with the unexpected sight of an empty tomb. Believing that *“they have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him”* (John 20:2), Mary is weeping inconsolably when a man appears at her side and asks her *“Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?”* (20:15). Expecting that this must be the gardener, she pleads that *“if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.”* But then an unexpected moment happens: the man speaks her name, *“Mary!”* at which point Mary Magdalene recognized that this is neither a gardener nor a grave robber; she cries out *“Rabbouni! (which means Teacher),”* for at the mention of her name she enters into an unexpected moment when she recognizes the risen Lord in her presence. Because of this encounter at this unexpected moment, Mary proclaims the Easter message when he announces to the disciples, *“I have seen the Lord.”*

Unexpected moments ...

The two travelers on the road to Emmaus don’t have many expectations for the future after having witnessed the death of Jesus in Jerusalem. For the disciples of Jesus, all of their hopes for the future are as dead and buried as the man from Nazareth; as they share with the mysterious stranger who joins them on the road, *“we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel”* (Luke 24:21). When they arrive at their expected destination, they extend hospitality to their fellow traveler to *“stay with us, because it is almost evening, and the day is now nearly over.”* (24:29). It is while they sit at the dinner table that they experience their unexpected moment: their guest *“took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.”* (24:30-31). Their unexpected moment in the presence of the Risen Christ compels them to return to Jerusalem with the good news that *“The Lord has risen indeed” ... and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.”* (24:34-35).

Unexpected moments ...

It was while the disciples were speaking with the men from Emmaus that *“Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’”* (24:36). Their unexpected moment in the presence of the Risen Christ is one that startles and terrifies them, for they *“thought that they were seeing a ghost.”* The risen Jesus invites them to *“look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones and you see that I have.”* (24:39). Jesus then asks for something to eat; when

the disciples give him a piece of broiled fish, *“he took it and ate in their presence,”* proving that the unexpected moment was the moment of the fulfillment of the gospel promise: Christ is risen indeed, and is present among his disciples.

- “Their God and ours proves to be a flesh and blood God, not a disembodied spirit. This God is vulnerable to everything that is human, including the capability of being hurt and spilling tears. Not a ghoulie or ghostie at all, God is at home in the flesh, wearing everything from bones and nerve endings to taste buds and a digestive tract.” – Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*.

But the most unexpected moment in the Easter Gospel comes when Jesus teaches his followers that everything that has occurred should not be seen as unexpected but is the fulfillment of all that God promised through the Scriptures:

- “‘These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you – that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.’ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, ‘Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.’” – 24:44-47.

The unexpected moment of Easter is in reality the fulfillment of the people’s expectations of a Saviour who would redeem God’s people and restore them to the relationship that God always willed for God’s people, the one who *“will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.”* (Isaiah 40:11).

While Jesus’ words focus the attention of the disciples on the fulfillment of the expectant hopes of God’s people, his next statement will be the most unexpected of all: *“You are witnesses of these things.”* (24:48). To be a “witness” (*martyria*) did not mean being a mere spectator or passive observer; the disciples would have understood that they were now being called to actively sharing the Gospel, with all of the risks that it will entail. They are being called by the Risen Lord to continue to his work of proclaiming the good news, fulfilling his earlier warning that following Jesus meant following him in the path led to his suffering and will lead to theirs as well:

- “... they will arrest you and persecute you; they will hand you over to synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors because of my name ... You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, by relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. You will be hated by all because of my name.” – Luke 21:12, 16-17.

At this unexpected moments, the disciples – who to this point had been followers and students of Jesus – now become *“apostles,”* those who are “sent out” by the Risen Christ to be witnesses of the fulfillment of God’s promises in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, witnesses *“in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8). As they will discover, this apostolic ministry of witnessing to the Gospel of Jesus Christ will fulfill Jesus’ warnings of the cost of witnessing, the cost of faithful discipleship to Jesus Christ:

- It will mean imprisonment, as happened to Peter and John *“because they were teaching the people and proclaiming that in Jesus there is the resurrection of the dead.”* (Acts 4:2).
- It will mean beatings and imprisonment, as Paul and Silas experienced in Philippi: *“After they had given them a severe flogging, they threw them into prison and ordered the jailer to keep them*

securely. Following these instructions, he put them in the innermost cell and fastened their feet in the stocks.” (Acts 16:23-24).

- It will mean what the word “witness” has come to be understood: martyrdom, giving one’s life for the sake of one’s witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which was the fate of Stephen who became the first Christian martyr when *“they dragged him out of the city and began to stone him ... While they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, ‘Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.’ Then he knelt down and cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them.’ When he had said this, he died.”* (Acts 7:58-60).

When these disciples answered Jesus’ invitation to discipleship, none of them probably expected that the path they would follow would lead to such risk witnessing, a ministry of proclamation that would end in martyrdom. But there is no evidence that any of them turned away from this task or balked at Jesus’ command; for when he warned them that they would share his suffering, Jesus also proclaimed the good news that they would also share in his glory: *“But not a hair of your head will perish. By your endurance you will gain your souls.”* (Luke 21:18-19). They went forward and witnessed in trust and hope, in the sure and certain confidence that because death was not the last word for Christ, neither would it be the last word for those who are in Christ Jesus. The Apostle Paul, whose life would end in martyrdom because of his faithful witness, proclaimed that even the suffering which others inflict upon Christ’s witnesses will be transformed into a hope that does not disappoint because it is rooted in the unexpected by glorious message of the Easter Gospel:

- *“... we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* – Romans 5:3-5.

Paul witnessed in the confidence that *“neither death, nor life, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39).

Every generation of Christians who have continued this apostolic witness have experienced those “unexpected moments” when their mission led to into places and experiences that they were not expecting. As we continue to rejoice that “Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!” in 2018, we need consider what are the unexpected moments that are challenging us as God’s people today?

- We live in an unexpected moment in which the Gospel that we proclaim is no longer as widely received or believed as it was in previous generations.
- We live in an unexpected moment in which the Church is more on the margins than at the centre of society.
- We live in an unexpected moment when people both within and without the Church are wondering if Christianity has a future.

Few of us are prepared for the unexpected moment in which the Church of Jesus Christ finds itself. The world in which the Church exists today is far different from the context of our parents’ generation; for many of us, it is radically different from the world of our childhoods (it has changed drastically over the years of my ordained ministry). As one Lutheran pastor has remarked, *“the world has changed – and we didn’t get a vote!”*

Yet even though we find ourselves in such an “unexpected moment,” one for which we may not feel prepared and which fills us with despair and anxiety over the future of the church, one thing remains unchanged: Christ still calls us to be his witnesses in this generation as he has called his people to be faithful witnesses to the Gospel of his death and resurrection in all times and places. We are still the Church of Christ that *“in every age, beset by change but Spirit-led, must claim and test its heritage, and keep on rising from the dead.”* (ELW Hymn 729). Even though the context in which we live and witness has changed, the message that is at the heart of our witness remains the same: *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.”* (John 3:16). No matter how unexpected the moment may appear, we live in the assurance of one fundamental expectation: the promise of our Risen Lord that *“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20). As Lutheran Christians, we continue to believe and teach the sure and certain hope that *“at all times there must be and remain one holy, Christian Church. It is the assembly of all believers among whom the gospel is purely preached and the holy sacraments are administered according to the gospel.”* (Augsburg Confession). Yes, the Easter Gospel is filled with unexpected moments – and the Church that continues to proclaim the good news of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ will continue to encounter unexpected moments as it faithfully witnesses to this good news. We do not know what to expect for ourselves or for our Church in the future – but what we *can* expect is that Christ is with us always, that God’s Will is certainly going to be accomplished “on earth as it is in heaven,” and that *“the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.”* (Philippians 1:6). Amen.