

*This Is Not What We Were Expecting*

John 20:1-18

This is probably not the day we would have chosen for Easter. Like graduations and confirmations, we would have postponed Easter this year, until we could all be together in one place wearing something other than the sweats we wore yesterday. We wanted to sit in a crowded sanctuary, go out afterward for brunch.

But Easter is not a product of our planning or our calendaring—not this year, or any year, actually. Easter is the only holiday that is set by the moon. Easter is always on the first Sunday after the first full moon on or after the spring equinox. As complicated as that sounds, it makes a sort of ancient sense, because it means that Easter always coincides with the greening of the earth. Even this year. No matter how different our lives are this year, how out-of-sync we feel, to the earth it is spring. Trees are budding, flowers are blooming; the earth is coming to life.

And spring is an entirely natural thing. The earth makes it happen, not humans. Every year, trees lose all their leaves in the winter and look dead, and then—you can count on it—they sprout new leaves in the spring. You put a dead-looking daffodil bulb in the ground in the fall, and, lo and behold, it almost always ends up with leaves and pretty flowers after the winter. We all know, from a very young age, about caterpillars that hug themselves into cocoons for a while before they become butterflies.

Daffodils and butterflies—things that hibernate before they come back to life—these have become the culture's symbols for Easter. They help us explain a part of the Christian tradition that is otherwise unexplainable. They illustrate a regular cycle in nature; every year, death and new life. That's how things are supposed to work. But you know, those natural symbols are a little misleading when it comes to the Easter story.

Because the Easter story, actually, is not natural. In fact, it's entirely unnatural. I, personally, have never known someone who has died and then left their grave and come back to life. When a human being dies, their body goes into the ground, and that's that. You don't wait around for that person to re-appear so that you can pick up where you left off. With tears in your eyes, you say good-bye. You try to go on with your life the best you can. From what we can see, the new life of spring might happen on trees, but it's not going to happen to the person you loved. It only takes one death in our lives to learn that lesson, to learn not to expect anything more.

Mary knew that too as she walked to the tomb that Sunday morning. She was going to pay her respects, maybe to find a quiet place where no one else had to see the full weight of her sadness at her friend's death. She fully expected her friend's lifeless body to be inside that tomb, right where they'd put it, where it would never move from ever again. She was an adult. She knew how things work, how things happen naturally.

But here's where this story takes an unnatural turn. When Mary got to the tomb, right away she could tell something was wrong. That big rock she watched them roll over the

face of the cave was not where it was supposed to be. What happened? The possibilities must have raced through her mind. How do things like this usually happen? Someone must have moved it! Someone, probably some official afraid that Jesus' tomb would become a shrine for his followers, had taken his body. Hidden it somewhere else.

Mary found the disciples, told them what she thought must have happened. Peter and John took off to see for themselves. They ran, the Bible tells us. When they got there, they too were mystified. Maybe they talked for a few minutes about who might have tampered with Jesus' grave. Lots of possibilities. No answers. One thing I am sure of: Almost certainly they did not think about resurrection. 'Miracle' is the last thing we're inclined to think when we're trying to explain how something happened. And so the men went home, to think some more.

(This is what we do when something happens that we didn't expect and don't understand. First we run around a lot, and *then* we stop and think.)

But Mary stayed. I imagine she stood, and then sat, and then maybe she walked around in circles. She looked in the tomb again. She talked to angels, told them her theory about the body being stolen. Are you getting a picture here? Joy was not the feeling of that first Easter morning. It was total confusion.

Mary turned around, and she almost bumped into the gardener. Well, maybe he would know something about the body. So she asked him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, just tell me where you have laid him. I'll take him.' She never looked directly at the face she was talking to. It didn't cross her mind that she might run into Jesus because she knows Jesus is dead. All she's hoping to find is his body.

But then the gardener spoke. "Mary," he said. It startled her. He said her name. *Her name*. Finally she looked up. To see what should have been the gardener. And then he was not.

"Rabbouni!" she cried out. My teacher. Maybe that was Mary's favorite name for Jesus in the old days. She was indescribably relieved. She lunged toward him for a hug, like someone who has been social distancing for weeks. This is not my favorite part of the Easter story. If I were writing this drama, I would have written in here a long, tearful hug, followed by Jesus saying, "Find the others and tell them I'm back. We're getting out of here and going home."

But Jesus didn't say that. He said to Mary, "Don't cling to me." Don't cling to me. Maybe he could hear it in her voice, how she wanted him back the way he was before, so they could go back to the way they had been, back to the old life where everything was familiar, not frightening and unnatural like it felt now.

But Jesus' resurrection didn't put things back to the way they were.

And the Easter story is not just a reminder about the natural order of things.

The Easter story is about a miracle.

The Easter story changes everything.

And it still confuses us.

The hope this day brings is not a promise that things will return to the way they used to be. The reason this story has changed people's lives for two thousand years and maybe even changed life itself is not because it confirms all the things we already knew and have learned to expect by watching the patterns in nature.

This story defies all our expectations. It leaves us confused about what exactly happened here. Two thousand years later, we are not so different from those first witnesses, Mary and Peter and John. Easter is the story Annie Dillard was talking about when she wrote, 'It is madness for women to wear straw and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should hand out life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews.'

This story is about a miracle.

To call ourselves Easter people is to name ourselves people who believe—who bet our lives on the truth—that on this day, something unexplained and unexplainable happened. On this day, Jesus, a person who walked around on this earth and then died, was alive again. You know that saying, 'There are only two things that are certain in life: death and taxes'? Easter people say, 'Well maybe, but apparently those things are not the end of the story.'

Easter people have hope. Hope that even when everything familiar is taken away, the God who raised Jesus from the dead is still alive, still working, still likely to show up in some way that will startle and confuse us.

Easter people know that however sensible we are about following instructions, however well we know the science that tells us how things are supposed to work, there is another force loose in the world.

Easter people know that the God who is always surprising, never predictable, is still holding on to the universe.

Just like Mary, sometimes we just want something we can cling to. Especially in times like this. We think what we need most right now is something solid and predictable. Something that follows the normal, natural order of things. Give me a caterpillar, or a daffodil...or the way things were two months ago.

That's not enough, our God says. Your expectations are too small. What God wants for you, what will send your life down a different path, is the truth that there is more life than you have imagined, more possibility than what you have hoped for. There is death...yes, there is death...and there is more life. Wait for it, God says. I will bring it to you. A hundred years ago the theologian Karl Barth said: The gospel is not a natural 'therefore'. It's a miraculous 'nevertheless'. Easter is not about what happens in the normal course of things. Resurrection, new life that comes after everything we know and understand has died, will never square with how life is supposed to work. Resurrection is the last thing we are expecting. Easter is about more hope than we have ever learned to look for. A hope that maybe even the unnatural and the unexpected can happen in our

lives, in this life. A hope that the world will emerge from this dark time into something that will not be the same, not what we expected, but something that is glorious nevertheless.

Always, but especially now, there are so many people in this world ready to speak with the voice of cynicism, sure that the worst story is the truest story. Easter people speak with hope. They live by a different story. Theirs—ours—is the story of this surprising Easter day: that the most impossible miracle has happened. That we have *seen* life overcome death. And because of that we know: Anything—everything—is possible.