

April 20, 2025  
The Resurrection of Our Lord—Easter Day  
Year C  
John 20:1-18  
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA  
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### Unexpected

In 1998, I went on a trip to Israel led by one of my seminary professors and Britton. Britton was the professor's teaching assistant, and he helped him lead tours to Israel for four or five years. During our trip we visited many historic and biblical sites, we learned about the ongoing conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, although at that particular moment in history, things were fairly calm, we rode camels in the desert, we saw snow in Jerusalem and saw the staff in the hotel where we were staying make snow camels. It was a three-week trip, and we spent about a week of the trip in Jerusalem, learning about the city, seeing the sites there and on the mount of Olives, where we were staying.

I remember being particularly excited about the day when we were going to the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, the ancient church that was built over what was believed to be the location of Jesus' crucifixion and burial.

When we got to the church I have to admit, it wasn't what I had imagined. It was hard even to see and take in the whole building, surrounded as it was by other buildings, in a busy, crowded, ancient city. It was clear that it had been added onto over the centuries, reflecting the architecture of the different religious groups that had had control over the building.

At the time that I visited, many different Christian denominations had control over the building, including Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Armenian Apostolic, Coptic, Syriac, and Ethiopian Orthodox.

With the others from my group and many other pilgrims I waited in line to get into the church to see the holy site, the place that is believed to be the empty tomb of Jesus.

The style of the décor of the church was very different from what I am used to. It was covered in gold plating, icons, lanterns, candles, mosaics, arches. It didn't look anything like I imagined Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified, or Jesus' tomb would have looked like.

This is how Jesus' tomb is described in the gospel of John:

Now there was a garden in the place where [Jesus] was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there. (John 19:41-42)

This church, the church of the Holy Sepulcher was supposed to be that place, the tomb in the garden near where Jesus was crucified. But this was not a garden, not a simple tomb, carved out of the rock. It was a crowded church, and the tomb itself was in its own structure within the church and to my Lutheran sensibilities, it was all elaborately decorated to the point of being gaudy. It was nothing like what I had pictured. It was not what I expected.

A few years ago, a friend of mine, someone I knew at my church in Connecticut and who I have kept in touch with over Facebook, went on her own pilgrimage to Israel. She shared her itinerary with her Facebook friends and mentioned that she was going to the "Garden Tomb" of Jesus in Jerusalem.

The Garden Tomb is exactly what you might expect when you think of the place where Jesus was laid after his crucifixion. It's a beautiful garden with a limestone tomb in its center. It's outdoors and the people who run the site have put benches around it for people to sit and meditate. It's run by British Christians,

and it really appeals to the kind of Protestant and Evangelical religious aesthetic. Based on the pictures you can find on the internet, it almost looks like the set of a movie about Jesus' crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. You can so easily imagine Mary meeting Jesus there. It's exactly what you would expect.

Speaking of Mary, of course, she was in Jerusalem on that first Easter day. Well, more accurately, she was just outside of Jerusalem for Jesus was crucified and buried outside of the city gates.

She had gone to the tomb early in the morning, so early it was still dark, to visit the burial place of her rabbi, her friend, Jesus. And what was she expecting? Of course she was expecting to encounter death there, to encounter Jesus' dead body there, to find the end of all of her hopes and dreams there, lying behind the cold, immovable stone that had been rolled over the entrance to the tomb.

But when she got there, she found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. That was not what she had been expecting.

So, she ran to tell Peter and the other disciple, the one who Jesus loved, what had happened, that Jesus' body had been visited with yet another indignity. That even in death his enemies could not let him rest.

"They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him." Mary told them. (John 20:2)

Then a race to the tomb between Peter and the other disciple ensued, but both of them, after seeing what Mary had seen, the stone rolled away, the empty tomb, left that place, left the garden and the empty tomb, left Mary there, alone.

And Mary, who at that moment probably thought that she would always be alone, stood weeping at the entrance of the tomb.

But when she looked into the tomb, to confirm that Jesus was still gone, that his body was still missing, instead of an empty tomb, she saw two angels, who asked her a question. "Woman, why are you weeping?" (John 20:13)

She gave them the only answer she had. She was weeping not just because Jesus was dead, but because even his beaten, broken body was gone. “They have taken away my Lord and I do not know where they have laid him.” (John 20:13)

Then turning away from the tomb, away from the angels, not expecting them to have an answer for this latest heartbreak in a tragedy strewn three days, she saw a man. A man who she thought was a stranger.

Why didn't she recognize him? For it was Jesus, standing in front of her. Jesus, resurrected. Was the rising sun in her eyes, making him look like the glowing outline of a man, featureless, in her sun blinded sight? Or did she not recognize him only because resurrection was not what she was expecting.

She had been expecting nothing but a tomb where she could go to weep, to cry out her grief at the death of her friend. It seemed like she was not even going to get that. To her, the empty tomb was not a gift, not a joy. It was insult to injury. Before that Easter day, nobody expected resurrection.

So, Mary looked at the man she assumed was a stranger, maybe the gardener and said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” (John 20:15) Based on her expectations, the best case scenario was that someone would tell her where Jesus' body was, would give him back to her so that she could find him a resting place, where he could lie, undisturbed.

And then the unexpected happened, the amazing, the miraculous happened. The resurrected Jesus called her name. “Mary!” (John 20:16)

And with that word Mary's broken heart was healed. Joy and hope were resurrected in her, when she realized that the man in front of her, glowing in the light of the Easter dawn, was Jesus, her beloved Lord, her “Rabbouni!” (John 20:16)

And in that moment Mary found that God could confound all of her expectations, that life was nothing but cruel, that death was the end, that an empty

tomb could mean anything other than graverobbing, another way to break her heart.

In that moment, when she was confronted with the unexpected, with resurrection, her broken heart was healed and she became the first to announce the good news to all who would listen, that Jesus was alive, that she had seen the Lord! (John 20:18)

I visited that tomb, that empty tomb, that tomb where the stone had been rolled away. That empty tomb that doesn't look anything like I would have expected, that doesn't look anything like a set where Mary might have encountered Jesus on that first Easter morning. I believe that the Church of the Holy Sepulcher is the site of the true tomb of Jesus even though it doesn't look like I would have expected, like I would have hoped.

Like thousands of other pilgrims that day, I entered the church door and then stood in line to walk into the building inside the building, the church inside the church, that housed the ancient tomb. When my turn came, I walked into the little building, conscious of all the people behind me, waiting their turn, knowing that I didn't have much time to look, to pray, to meditate on what I was seeing. After all, if history is correct this was the place where they laid Jesus' broken, crucified body, where he had laid in death, and then, as was promised, where he was raised from the dead.

But as I hurried past, pausing briefly trying to figure out what to pray, what to feel in that moment, I have to admit, I didn't actually feel much at all. I was left feeling disappointed. I had looked forward to this moment for days, weeks even, maybe even months, ever since I had planned the trip and instead of some grand, soaring, spiritual moment, I felt empty.

I left the tomb area, the church within the church, entered the less structured space on the other side of the tomb and tried to sort out what I had just experienced and why I was feeling the way I was feeling, when something happened that

transformed the experience for me. I don't remember what time it was, but it must have been one of hours assigned for daily prayer in monastic communities.

Remember how I said that many different Christian denominations had a presence in the church of the Holy Sepulcher, monastic communities that lived and worshiped there, from different nations, different languages, all Christians, but with different words and ways of praying.

Well, shortly after I, disappointed, having found the tomb empty, of course, of Jesus, but also of a sense of spiritual connection, for me at least, I found what I was expecting, though in a completely unexpected way.

Because in that moment, all of the communities that claimed that place as their holy ground started to pray, they started to sing, they started to chant, they started to speak, their words of praise and prayer and gratitude to God, to the Lord, Jesus, who was not in the tomb, but who was certainly in that place in that holy place, where the worship of the faithful has been offered for centuries, for millennia. Words of joy, words of gratitude for the gift of resurrection offered by communities knit together, not by shared language or custom or decoration sense, but by one thing. By Jesus, who met Mary in the garden in a wholly unexpected way. By Jesus, who met me in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, not in the way I was expecting, but alive, living in the voices, in the prayers and praise of his people.

Today is Easter Sunday. Perhaps we come to this day with our own set of expectations, about what the church should look like, about what worship should feel like, about what time with our friends or families should be like. It certainly looks and feels like Easter outside there, with blue skies and blooming flowers and budding trees, new life all around us.

Perhaps this day will meet our expectations, but whether it does or it doesn't, I hope that we will remember to keep our eyes open, our hearts open, for the ways that Jesus might meet us in the unexpected.

Mary didn't expect resurrection when she saw the empty tomb. But Jesus met her in the garden.

I didn't expect spiritual connection, after the empty tomb disappointed, but Jesus met me in the prayers and praise and songs of strangers.

And for you, for me, for all of us, we should get ready, we should learn to expect the unexpected. For resurrection is exactly that, unexpected. But still, Alleluia, Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.