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*Christ Lutheran Church, Ferndale, WA*

*Easter Sunday*

*April 4, 2021*

*Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118: 1-2. 14-24; Acts 10:34-43; John 20:1-18*

It might be unexpected today that I'm preaching from a garden. I'm in the garden next to Hovander House in Ferndale because the very first Easter happened in a garden, not of course next to a house, but next to an empty tomb. And there were so many things that happened that first Easter that were also unexpected:

Mary didn't expect the stone to be rolled away from the tomb. Peter and the other disciple didn't expect to see the linen wrappings that had been on Jesus' head and body to be rolled up and lying by themselves. Mary didn't expect to see angels. And she certainly didn't expect to see the risen Jesus.

Like Mary and Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved, what we expect and what actually happens are often very different things.

When you think about last Easter, isn't it true that you fully expected that by this Easter life would be back to normal? Isn't it true that you expected we'd be worshiping back in person today? I can even tell that many of us have the Easter blahs this year—only about a third of you who sent in a video last Easter saying "He is risen indeed, alleluia!" sent one in this year. Maybe it's because you expected Easter to be different this year, and my goodness, it is not.

I heard a podcast from a neuropsychologist the other day who said that our nervous systems have literally been in a constant stress cycle for over a year. The stressors we face of health concerns and economic collapse and inequality and fear that we or someone we love will get sick or die from the virus have been constantly coming at us with no relief. Being in a stress cycle makes us more irritable, makes it harder to focus or remember things, makes our energy lag, or makes us have powerful cravings, or constant worries, or intrusive thoughts, or emotional tailspins. Our routines have been upended, and some days we feel like we don't have any routine and we don't even remember what day it is. We expect to be able to handle the difficulties life brings us, but the reality is that sometimes we just can't.

And add to that our expectations that our partners will understand us, but they sometimes don't. Our expectations that our children will act a certain way, but sometimes they don't. Our expectations that our teachers will understand why we didn't do so well on a paper or a test, but sometimes they don't. Our expectations that our boss will have our back, but sometimes they don't.

Our expectations that life will go our way, but sometimes it just doesn't. Our expectations and our reality are sometimes very different things.

That first Easter, when expectations and reality were also so very different, it turns out that it was in the reality, in the opposite of what was expected, where Jesus showed up. It was where there were tears and death and fear and confusion and a stress cycle that had been going for three days that Jesus appeared, risen and ready to usher in new life.

Thankfully for Mary, when she expected that she was weeping in front of the gardener, the reality was that she was weeping in front of her savior. The risen Jesus was right where she didn't expect him to be. And for that, Alleluia!

When Jesus rose from the dead, he shattered everyone's expectations. The expectation that death was final was not the reality anymore. Jesus had fulfilled the prophecy from Isaiah: And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples...and will swallow up death forever—and for that, Alleluia!

When we expect that our tears will never end and our worries will envelop us, the reality is that the Lord God will wipe *away* the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of God's people God will take away from all the earth—and for that, Alleluia!

When we expect that inequality of race or class or sexuality or gender is just how things are, the Bible tells of feasts of unity where those with less privilege are favored and the hungry are fed because the love of Christ is transforming the world—and for that, Alleluia!

When you expect relationships to be one way and they are not, when you expect life to be easy and it isn't, when you expect that death always has the last word, when a second pandemic Easter is not what you envisioned, just like that first Easter, the risen Christ shows up smack dab in the middle of the reality you didn't expect, to offer healing and new life. And for that, Alleluia!

The promise of Easter is that Jesus comes close and calls you by name when you are weeping outside the tomb of someone you love. Jesus calms your regrets and anxieties by assuring you that he is as close to you as your own breath. Jesus loves you and forgives you unconditionally when you feel like you least deserve it. And Jesus promises that the fear and the pain of this present life, and of these pandemic days, are not the end of the story. And for that—Alleluia!

Perhaps on Easter today you may want to go walk in a garden—in your own backyard or a place like Hovander—where you can remember that it was first in a garden where Christ was risen indeed and we didn't get what we expected. And for that, Alleluia! Amen.