

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
John 20:1-18 Easter Sunday

April 16, 2006
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1Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance. 2So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb. 4Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. 5He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in. 6Then Simon Peter, who was behind him, arrived and went into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there, 7as well as the burial cloth that had been around Jesus' head. The cloth was folded up by itself, separate from the linen. 8Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed. 9(They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

10Then the disciples went back to their homes, 11but Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?"

"They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him." 14At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15"Woman," he said, "why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?"

Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16Jesus said to her, "Mary."

She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means Teacher).

17Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet returned to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.' "

18Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Let us pray.

O come Holy Spirit.

Come as the fire, and burn

Come as the wind, and cleanse

Come as the light, and reveal

Come as the water, and refresh.

Convict, convert and consecrate us,

Until we are wholly yours.

Amen.

I really wanted a girl. I dreamed about bringing our little girl home from the hospital. We even decided to forego the developments of modern science that would have revealed the gender of our baby. I said it was because I wanted to be surprised, but in truth it was because I didn't think we even needed it. Because, I knew we were having a girl. Surely we were expecting a girl.

You can imagine my shock and surprise when the doctor held the baby up and—well, it quite obviously was not a girl. Some parents check for ten little fingers and ten little toes, I didn't even notice his hands or his feet because I was just so dumbfounded and amazed that our baby was a boy. The evidence was unmistakable, but still it took a few moments for the truth to set in. And I was delighted, just as I would have been had the baby been a girl, it's just that I was really,

really surprised. A little baby boy wasn't at all what I had been expecting and so it took a while for the reality of the situation to sink in.

When we don't get what we're expecting, it can take a while for the real truth to set into our brains. So it was with Mary at the tomb on that first Easter morning. Can you imagine her that day, dragging herself out of bed early Sunday morning after a hellish week. A week during which she watched her dear friend and teacher be tortured and killed. A week during which she watched as his friends—indeed many of them her friends as well—turned their backs on their friend. A week during which she watched all of her hopes and dreams for the future be dashed by a cross and all that remained was a dead body—a body pierced in the side with holes in the hands and feet. And now, instead of her teacher's voice beckoning "Mary, Mary", her ears stung with the silence of that body beckoning her to the tomb, beckoning her to finish the job the Roman soldiers had begun a few days before, for the body had yet to be anointed. Oh, Mary. So sad. So heartbroken. So tired. Indeed so tired that she must have thought she was imagining things, caught in a state of exhausted hallucination, when she arrived at the tomb and found the stone rolled away, the tomb empty. I imagine that she rubbed her eyes, and shook her head, trying to displace the veil of exhaustion clouding her mind and vision. And yet, even then, there was no body. Where was the body she had expected to find there?

Unmet expectations—at best they throw us for a loop and shake us up a little bit. As worst, they leave us frustrated, depressed, and confused. Expectations help us to shape and organize our world. They help us to plan and prepare. When we don't know what to expect, we have a tough time orienting ourselves. Any of you who have shopped at the new Tom's West Bay know what I mean. Usually when we go to buy groceries, we know what to expect. We move efficiently through the aisles, anticipating the next thing on our list and knowing where to find it. But my first time at the new Tom's, it took me twenty minutes to buy apples, milk, and cereal because things weren't as I expected them to be—the store isn't laid out like the old Tom's. Now that I'm used to it, the new store exceeds my expectations with its wide aisles and those very fun self-check out lanes. But at first I was a bit put off by the changes, it took me a while to get used to them.

Surely all of us know a feeling akin to Mary's when she didn't find what she was expecting in the garden cemetery that morning. We too have had our hopes dashed when the job we were expecting to get didn't pan out or the phone call we were expecting never came or the pension increase we were promised was never paid. I know some of you here this morning never expected that you'd be living alone, your beloved spouse having passed from this world into the next long before you were ready to say goodbye. If someone had asked us twenty years ago to describe what our lives would be like today, I'm guessing that a good number of us would never have expected for things to turn out the way they're turning out. And that's not necessarily good or bad, it just is. In Mary's case on that first Easter morning, her unmet expectation was definitely a good thing. A risen savior who conquers death and returns to earth is far better than a dead body to anoint. Finding the messiah alive is the greatest exceeding of expectations the world has ever known!

But our initial response to unmet expectations is often negative like Mary's was, especially when life fails to meet up with our expectations. We know this from our own experiences of situations

falling short of our expectations and we know this, too, from our experiences of being the one on the other side of the equation—the one who doesn't quite meet up to expectations.

Our dear friend Beth grew up in an Italian-American family living in the “Little Italy” neighborhood of Portland, Maine. Though she felt loved by her parents, there was a stigma surrounding her birth—and the birth of any of girl in that ethnic neighborhood. News of a brand new baby boy was met with yelps of excitement and hearty embraces. But if the family had a girl—especially as a first born—well, the news spread not by shouts of joy and slaps on the back but via the grapevine with a lot of hushed voices and the shaking of heads—sideways, not up and down. The grand expectations of having a first-born son were dashed by the arrival of a baby girl for no other reason than the little dear lacked a Y chromosome. And Beth, the product of such a culture, holds this failure to meet expectations within her to this day, 53 years after her birth. When I saw her a couple of weeks ago, she brought it up again. Sure, she's smart, a hard worker, a fine artist, an incredible mother, and a dear friend but, she wasn't a boy and in her culture that meant she wasn't what everyone really wanted and even expected she'd be—and that stigma haunts her even now.

Society in general, and sometimes our family and acquaintances in particular, aren't shy about telling us the many ways in which we fail to meet up to expectations. TV images, newspaper ads and magazine covers shout at us. People we know make sly comments or little jokes that are cloaked as harmless but carry a powerful and hurtful message . . . You're not as handsome as we expect you to be. You're not as thin as we expect you to be. You're not as wealthy as we expect you to be. You don't work as hard as we expect you to. You don't have the kind of spouse we expect you to. You don't get good grades like we expect you to. You're older than we expected you'd be. You're shorter than we expected you'd be. You're less experienced than we thought you'd be. Basically, you're just not what we expected. And though we're in no way obligated to meet or exceed another person's or society's expectations of us, these kinds of sentiments—spoken or maybe unspoken and yet made known—these sentiments can still hurt. They tell us that we don't stack up, we're not good enough, we're not worthy—another way of saying we are without worth.

And yet I ask you, if that were true, if you were without worth, if you didn't stack up and if you weren't good enough, would Good Friday have happened? Here we have Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords telling us that we're worth enough to him that he is willing to die for us. You may have grown up thinking you weren't worthy of your parents love but Jesus is telling you that you are worthy of his life. You may have a boss who lets you know that you're not worth a raise, but Jesus is telling you that you are worthy of his life. You may have kids who think you're not worth much as a parent, but Jesus is telling you that you are worthy of his life. You may have voices inside your head telling you that because you're old, young, heavy, retired, female, male, gay, dark-skinned, poor, single, sick, whatever it is you are—that for some reason you are unworthy. But those are our labels, not God's. Jesus didn't die for the folks who had it all together, because in truth no one does. And because of that, Jesus died for us all and made us all worthy of love and dignity and respect and freedom. Jesus' love for us trumps all expectations anyone else might have of us. It says to us, “I love you just the way you are.”

My friend Beth, the same one whose gender the Italian's in Portland, Maine mourned over fifty years ago, brought to my attention a story of modern resurrection. This is the story of a group of women finding new life and being “born again”—much like we have the opportunity to do every Easter morning when Jesus exceeds all expectations, trumps death, and makes us all worthy of love, acceptance, and respect. It is found in Sue Monk Kidd's book, *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*.

When I was in Crete I found myself in the Skoteino Cave . . . As I wrote earlier, going into the dark of that cave . . . had been a parable of what it's like to grope our way into the unexplored . . . But I learned other lessons as well after we blew out our candles and sat on the cave floor.

I was leaning against a huge stalagmite, seeing nothing, but I could smell the wetness in the air. The rocks beneath me were slick with calcareous water. The only sound was dripping, rhythmic as a heartbeat.

I was thinking how in ancient times caves were known as wombs of the earth, and I began to feel that not just I but all of us were gathered there inside [God], waiting to be born in some new way.

Finally we lit our candles and moved back single file along the narrow passage or rock, climbing up and out. Because the rocks were slippery and the passage steep, the way was treacherous. In some place we had to hug the wall and maneuver along skinny ledges, and in one downright awesome place we had to slide slowly on our bottoms along a chute of rock with a precipice on each side.

After a while I noticed the air grew lighter. Looking up, I saw a circle of light above, streaming in milky rays into the tunnel. Something about seeing the opening of that cave excited a burst of energy in me, and I hurried toward it.

A couple of others who'd already emerged stood at the entrance, and as I came out, they began to clap and exclaim, “Oh look, wonderful! It's a girl! It's a girl!” It became every woman's greeting as she emerged. I stood there feeling infinitely welcome in the world . . . it seemed the valuing of my feminine life was coming from [God's Own Self].

Beth got tears in her eyes as she told me about this part of the book. Finally, vicariously through the experiences of the women on the pages of *The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, Beth was finding new life. She was overcoming that great expectation her community had had of her being a boy and was coming into her own as woman. She could finally say to herself what others had never before said of her existence, “Congratulations! It's a girl. And, we love you just the way you are.” And this is the way God receives each one of us by virtue of our being saved and given new life through Jesus. It's not just a female thing like it was for Beth, for surely we could all name for ourselves that thing or things about us that haunt us because we don't feel we're meeting up to expectations. But all of that is past and gone. There are no shaking heads and hushed voices because we don't meet up to expectations. Instead there is sheer, unadulterated delight in us as we are reborn—given new life on this day—by virtue of Christ's resurrection.

This morning, we walk out of our tombs, saved and made new, given new life and being born again. And we listen as creation rejoices at our re-birth—"Congratulations! It's a Dave. Congratulations! It's a Kathie. Congratulations! It's a Shirley. Congratulations! It's a John. Congratulations! It's a Bill. Congratulations! It's a Mary or a Margaret or a Sophie or a Sam or a Jim or a Jerry. Congratulations! It's a beloved child of God—you are a beloved child of God--saved and given new life and the life everlasting through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ! For on that first Easter Morning so many years ago, all creation sang Congratulations! It's the Risen Christ and Mary, her voice choked with tears of joy responded, Christ is risen indeed. And therefore, we too, will one day rise again even as we're being reborn now. Thanks be to God.