
It’s been about 20 years now, I guess, when during my time as a youth leader at our former church in New Jersey, I got a good question about Easter from a high school student. “I know Easter is a big deal for the church,” she began, “and I get all the ‘save me from my sins’ stuff. But, how does it really affect my life. Like, what difference does it make to me now, while I’m still alive?” +++ I think in that moment I knew how a trigonometry teacher feels when a student asks, “When am I ever going use this in real life?” +++ +++ I knew I’d never come up with a really good answer – so I just started talking: “Well,... because... Jesus was dead... – he was really dead – but then when people came to visit his tomb, he was gone... he had come back to life. **That means with God, life is always possible.** If Jesus could do **THAT** – if he could come back – be resurrected – if he can do what, he can do anything. No matter what – no matter how bad things get: Jesus can always make it better. **Life is always possible, Expect life.**” +++ +++ I don’t know how much sense that made to her. I wish I could say she came back years later to tell me it changed her life, or something... But there’s actually a better chance she walked away thinking, “**That was weird!”** Maybe not, though: sometimes you **DO** actually get through. +++ Anyway... this week – as I’ve been a bit off-balance, living through the isolation and dread of a pandemic, while at the same time preparing a message of Good News for Easter, that conversation came back to me. It came back to me when I began to notice that – this year – it was much easier to talk about Maundy Thursday – much easier to preach about Good Friday – than to give you the word for Easter +++ And I wondered:: with everything happening in the world right now – with death in every headline – had I forgotten by own answer about what Easter means to us, in the real world?? Had I forgotten to **Expect life!!??**

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A few minutes ago, Rev. Ames read our passage from Jeremiah. Jeremiah is a book filled with bitterness... and **often** very little hope. Jeremiah called for Judah to repent of its sins – to get rid of their idols – forsake the imaginary pagan gods of Canaan – and return to the true faith handed down to them by Moses – faith in the one true God. This made a lot of the people and their leaders angry with him. Even worse in their eyes, Jeremiah argued that they should acquiesce to the Babylonians to avoid total destruction. Now, I don’t know if Jeremiah was right or wrong about a **that**, but that’s not the point today. The point is, the people believed that no true calamity could ever happen to them, and so they ignored Jeremiah. They’d lived a charmed life so far – why would that ever change? They didn’t come up with a better plan – they just didn’t want to hear what he had to say. And so, their nation,... their holy city, Jerusalem,... their temple, were all destroyed and abandoned. The people were taken away to a land far away from the homes that had been given to them by God. +++ +++| +++ **And..., yes... I know**, throughout Lent and now through Holy Week, I keep talking about this, don’t I? Exile – destruction – broken hearts, and broken spirits – because it resonates so deeply with our lives at this moment. +++ We’ve talked about how Israel’s exile it relates our own sense of exile during this pandemic – a disease that’s driven us away... **away** from our church family,... **away** from our friends,... **away** from the normal rhythms of our lives... Driven each of us into isolation – into **exile.** +++ We’ve looked at it from just about every angle, it seems, haven’t we... **Almost...** But there’s **one more.** – And that’s to notice together how quickly God’s People lost hope when adversity struck. +++ Suddenly, complete denial that anything **bad** could ever happen – turned into complete **despair** – a deep dread that nothing **good** will ever happen again. Jeremiah saw this change. He knew that both of these extremes reflect a similar lack of faith – the same failure to see that the God of Israel is the God of History:: whether you’re being carted off into exile – or coming home again in freedom. You do both as a child of a loving, constant, and reliable God. +++ And so, when we get to chapter 31, Jeremiah, the great doomsayer, had changed his tune. Instead of a warning against unfaithful living – he writes a consolation, (here in the Divine Voice), to people who have **lost hope::** – **another kind** of unfaithful living. “The people who survived the **sword** found grace in the **wilderness,**” the Lord reminds them through Jeremiah,... “I have loved you with an **everlasting** love... **Again I will** build you, and **you shall be built**... **Again** you shall take your **tambourines**... **Again** you shall plant **vineyards**... the planters shall plant, and shall enjoy the fruit.”
This is God’s promise to God’s people!! +++ Bleak times will change. +++ But it’s hard not to fall into despair, isn’t it? When you’re living in exile?? When you have good reason to fear strangers on the sidewalk... When the numbers of sick and dying continue to rise – and even a leveling off of the graph we’ve all seen a hundred times – even a leveling off means thousands of people are still getting sick – and are still dying. +++ +++ It’s hard not to make the same leap as Israel – from “this will never happen” to “this will always happen.” +++ +++ To look where we’ve always found LIFE – and only see DEATH.

This is a pattern that’s repeated in today’s gospel reading, when Jesus’ closest followers allow despair to dictate their expectations. +++ If they had truly listened to what he taught them – if they responded in FAITH rather than DESPAIR – they would have known he was not really lost – that he would return to them... ++++++ ++++ Let’s go back a week, to Palm Sunday. People were shouting “Hosanna” in the streets, welcoming the “Son of David” – the Messiah. The disciples knew Jesus was ushering in the Kingdom of God and they were right there by his side. I’m sure everything seemed to be falling in place for their moment of glory. +++ And sure enough, all week, Jesus has been standing up to the “Powers that Be,” and no one has been able to overcome his simple – straightforward – righteousness. +++ He champions the poor and heals the sick. +++ Their time had come – it was time for Christ’s influence to keep growing – and start a real movement. +++ Nothing could go wrong now. +++ But then – it all seemed to fell apart.+++ In the matter of ONE DAY – Jesus was betrayed – +++ he was taken from them – +++ put on trial – +++ and crucified. +++ Dead. +++ Locked away in a sealed tomb. +++ Jesus’ disciples and other followers must have felt like they had been caught up in a whirlwind. +++ They THOUGHT they had known how everything was supposed to work out – how it was GOING to work out. – And, it was all coming together – then – suddenly it all seemed to fall through their fingers like sand. +++ The glory they expected depended on Jesus – and now Jesus was gone!! +++ They couldn’t finish their work without him… +++ What were they to do now??!! It was all over. Time to go home – nothing left but the memories.

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And, you know, Jesus had tried to tell them what lay ahead – to prepare them – to keep them from overreacting – to keep them from despair. He told them he would not abandon them. In fact he had been very clear about it. +++ In Chapter 7, Jesus tells his disciples, “I will be with you a little while longer, and then I am going to the Father.” +++ Chapter 14: “I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.” +++ Chapter 16: “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me… Because I am going to the Father.” +++ But they did not understand – and now he was gone.

Like God’s People in their time of exile so long ago, the ones who loved Jesus most fell from confidence to despair. So here we are – on the third day – early in the morning. +++ Mary Magdalene comes to the tomb, expecting to find nothing but death. +++ In her despair, Mary – a believer – looks for death – where there is RESURRECTION!! ++++++ She immediately sees – something unexpected has happened, +++ The stone, which had sealed the entrance, has been moved… and Jesus… is… gone…. Disappeared. – And her first thought was… ??? … that his body had been stolen by grave robbers. – What else could it possibly be? It’s not like he got up and walked out of there on his own!! ... +++ The first thing Mary does is run to tell Peter and the Beloved Disciple, and the two of them RACE to the tomb. +++ Peter enters first – and he starts looking for clues to what happened… As though he can figure it out with logic and observation… Solving the mystery of the missing corpse... The linen wrappings are here… the cloth that had been under Jesus’ head is there…

Where’s Jesus??... What’s going on?? … Who took him?? Peter has all the clues he needs – but in his own despair and panic – he forgets to believe – he forgets what Jesus had promised. +++ +++

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And so... I’ve been wondering... should we learn a lesson from Jesus’ closest friends and confidants? Their TRAUMA caused them to expect death... where there was life. +++ Israel’s TRAUMA, ripped from their
homes and carted to a hostile land, caused them to believe God’s back would be turned from them – forever. +++ Now, in our time of TRAUMA, that question from 20 years ago comes racing back: “But, how does Easter really affect my life. Like, what difference does it make to me now, while I’m still alive?” +++ Easter – the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ – the defeat of death forever – allows you to expect the absurdity of LIFE to arise from every circumstance. Life in Christ... here, on earth, in these bodies... or beyond, above, in the place he has prepared for us. Thanks to Easter – You can Expect Life. +++ +++

FAITH DOES NOT MEAN YOU ESCAPE FEAR – or disappointment. Faith does not depend on avoiding terrible things in your life – like watching your savior die slowly on a cross – or watching your world sink into the chaotic grip of a terrible pandemic. +++ Faith perseveres – faith walks through the valley of the shadow of death without fear because it trusts the Good Shepherd. +++ Faith doesn’t recoil from darkness, but trusts the light of Christ. +++ Faith doesn’t go to the tomb looking for death – NO – faith expects to find life... And life is there to greet it. +++ +++ *** Life... is always possible. Expect LIFE.” ***

The Risen Christ is here when you can’t see beyond the confines of this world because despair and disappointment have taken the reins of faith. +++ The Risen Christ is here when pandemic forces you to wait “safe at home” but you feel anything but safe. +++ The Risen Christ is here, bringing eternal life even when, in weariness, you expect to find only death. +++ Allow yourself to be Born Again from Above +++ Drink his Living Water +++ – Accept the balm of his love to soothe your weary soul. +++ +++ +++ Crucified?... Dead?... Buried?... YES – All Three. +++ But never lost. +++ +++ Stop looking in the grave – you will not find him there. – +++ He is Risen! +++ Expect LIFE from your savior – because he lives. In him, life is always possible because death has lost its sting. Expect LIFE for He is RISEN!! Alleluia!!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.