

“Tales of the Unexpected”

Luke 24:1-12

April 21, 2019

Roald Dahl is not a name one often hears from the pulpit. But I was a fan of children’s literature long before I had any children of my own, so I would have enjoyed his creation “James and the Giant Peach” even if my own son hadn’t been named James ... not to mention the screenplay for Ian Fleming’s “Chitty Chitty Bang Bang” as well as “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory.” But Dahl wrote more than just stories for kids. His anthology of short stories entitled “Tales of the Unexpected” were the basis for a television series that lasted a decade. He even got the attention of Alfred Hitchcock, who used some of Dahl’s materials for his own television program.

This time of year, some two billion people the world over are reliving, and celebrating, one of the most unexpected tales ever told about anybody. And this wasn’t just any old someone. These two billion people say that when they see this person, they claim to see God, that when they think of this person, they inevitably think of God, and that when they worship God, they worship God through this person, referring to him as nothing less than God’s son. In fact, they find this person and God to be virtually indistinguishable, leaving to theologians the finer points of the entire question of how Jesus and God can be one and the same.

When we look at the written record of what people thought of Jesus and how they evaluated him, we find that a lot of people weren’t quite ready for these unexpected developments. We sometimes fool ourselves into thinking that had we lived in Christ’s day, believing what for many people is clearly unbelievable would have been a lot easier.

Yet, in Matthew’s Gospel, even after the risen Christ had appeared to hundreds of persons, some of the original eleven disciples (and I quote) “still doubted.” Maybe familiarity breeds contempt, but even after spending months, if not years, in the company of this man, some of the disciples still didn’t get it. And now, almost two thousand years later, it really hasn’t gotten any easier.

In Mark's Gospel, the women who discovered an empty tomb were so shocked that at first they didn't say anything to anyone. Who could blame them? And when they finally broached the topic to the "original" disciples, none of them believed the women, accusing them of propagating "idle tales." At verse 14 in Mark's final chapter, the risen Jesus himself visits the remaining disciples and upbraids them for not believing what the women had to say to them.

In Luke's Gospel, the story is pretty much the same: the women were not believed, and the remaining disciples were scared out of their wits. It was as if their minds were frozen, incapable of accepting an unexpected twist to the story of their rabbi, who (the women claimed) had reversed, after the fact, the death sentence propagated by Pontius Pilate on behalf of Caesar, leader of the greatest empire the world had ever seen. How unexpected was *that*?

It is in John's Gospel that we meet Thomas, who gave no credence to the conclusions that his fellow disciples were coming to once the truth of what occurred finally began to dawn on them. Thomas didn't have the excuse that the unbelievable was being spread about by women ... no, Thomas didn't believe the male disciples of Christ. In fact, even when Jesus himself unexpectedly appears, Thomas - at first - refuses to accept what his overly rational mind is telling him.

It's not as if Jesus hadn't been preparing anyone who would listen that his ministry was not quite what people had in mind when they were waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus pointed to himself as the Suffering Servant of God - and even had scripture from the prophet Isaiah to back up his point. But somehow the disciples just couldn't get their minds around the idea that God suffers with us, that God feels our pain, and that God would humble himself on our behalf. God isn't supposed to act like that, is he? God is too exalted for that, isn't he? God needs to behave the way we would expect our God to behave. Our God needs to make sense to us, and conform to our expectations. Otherwise we'd dismiss such claims to divinity as wishful thinking at best, and fraudulent at worst.

But didn't Jesus teach that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last? That's not the way the world works, is it? And how about the parable of the mustard seed - you don't need great heaps of faith to be faithful, you don't need to be a Pharisee or a Sadducee or the Great High Priest in order for God to love you - it takes only a tiny whisper of faith to get us through the gates of Heaven into Paradise. Now that would be quite unexpected to those who had been taught that their entire life had to be governed by 613 scriptural rules, and that if we broke just one of them, we were unworthy.

Even in their daily lives together, Jesus told his disciples where to cast their nets. Think of that - as the son of a carpenter, what would Jesus know about fishing? "Jesus, get back in your own lane, and leave fishing to the experts!" Yet the experts don't always know everything, and the truth of how to get results could come from an unexpected quarter. And so it was in desperation that the fishermen disciples finally did what Jesus had suggested that they do. The result was a bountiful catch - an unexpected catch.

That, too, was the truth behind the feeding of the 5000. While everyone else was ready to throw up their hands in despair at the thought of getting real nourishment into the bodies of more persons than the Colebrook Store can serve in any one day, much less at one meal, Jesus calmly, and quietly, went about getting the job done. Whether it was a question of healing one person just from the hem of his robe being touched, or whether it was an almost Zen-like knack for sharing statements so profound that we still marvel at them, Jesus was the master of telling his followers, which includes us here today, the unexpected: that if you wish to gain your life, you will have to lose it, and that we will never get into heaven unless we become as little children. And almost 2000 years later, we're still puzzling over what he might have meant by all that.

Indeed, the unexpected proved to be a pattern for his entire ministry, for his very life. But have we learned to expect the unexpected? Can we truly see Christ in the face of a stranger who needs help? Do we discern Jesus in the convicted criminal who needs

to be visited in prison? Can we perceive godliness in someone whom we cannot understand because we may be separated from each other by our cultures, our politics, our status, our presumptions, our suppositions, our experiences of life?

The poet flippantly tells us that “things are seldom what they seem - skim milk masquerades as cream.” Sometimes we cannot see what is in front of us, because we see what we want to see, what we expect to see. This has so much become the case for countless believers that there is even a best selling book from the late 20th century entitled “Meeting Jesus Again - for the First Time.” We think we have the Son of God all figured out - but do we?

Easter reminds us that it is not where we would expect to find Christ that will turn out to be the case. The women at the tomb that Sunday morning learned that first hand. In fact, in all four Gospels it is not the women who find Christ after the resurrection: it is Jesus who finds *them*. Jesus was born, lived, and died in an attempt to find *us*, to reach out to us, and to gather us to himself, as a mother hen gathers her chicks beneath her wing. And, just like the widow searching for the lost coin, or the shepherd pursuing the one sheep that has strayed from the flock, Jesus now lives again in the hope of finding us.

Then, having been found, it becomes our task to live - as he lives - by seeking what he sought. What we must do is to make Easter not so much an observance of what we are told happened once upon a time long, long ago, but we need to make it happen, again, even now, by living the life Christ wishes us to live by seeking those whom he sought, in order to bring life eternal to others.

Let us pray: