

Easter Day 2025 – Not Expecting to Be Here!

Luke 24:1-12

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.

Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.'

Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

<Prayer>

On Good Friday the children made these wonderful pilgrim sticks for the Easter story. Let's see!

Indeed, life is a journey. But where does that journey take you? Well in my experience, and I'm sure yours also, we might end up somewhere we were not expecting.

My Own story

As young man growing-up I think I had lots of advantages – a good family, living near to London, a decent education, and good chances for a career. I used to be quite normal, you know! **But all through those years it felt like I was not going to be living standard model of life.** It became apparent to me that being fulfilled and having purpose (those deep things which give us meaning) for me was *not* going to be about what I could get or display or claim for myself. When I looked around, it seemed to me as if the world of 'normal behaviour' had to be lived as a game of winners and losers. **I knew from early on that didn't want to be part of that game.** Even from childhood I felt the rumour of God's purpose in my life as an alternative. Whatever God wanted from me I was going to do – and wherever it might be. **But I wasn't expecting to be here in Haslemere, doing this!**

That experience reminds me of Jesus, whose life went very differently to what those around him thought that it would be. He had an even greater sense of God's purpose in his life. **He knew that God was his Father.** As Jesus's ministry began, with all the wonderful things that were seen and heard around him, **for a about three years,** no one could have expected the story of how it would lead eventually to his brutal death, or how he would then go beyond death to bring everlasting life to us all. Easter tells of that incredible story. **In a way, we might all have our own Easter stories to tell. Were you expecting to find yourself, where you are now?**

The Link Story

For centuries, lives have been played out in places such as this church. Here is a great generational cross over, where lives begin and lives end. How many Easters have there been here, since 1870? But the Link build next door is older still, having been built in 1816. It was a construction with an **expected purpose**: for 160 years it ran as a school, until 1976, then for a further 50 years as a Church Hall. I have no doubt that being right next door to this, St Bartholomew's church, the school and Link have always seen as part of the church's purpose in the community. **It had a normal role, as would be expected.**

But now, in just a few days' time, the Link will close, and the builders will arrive. For most of a year it will undergo a total transformation into being the Link Community Hub. The project began in the spring of 2022 with good intentions and hopes, but very little by way of certainty or even any idea about how much it would cost. We were not even sure if anyone would want it. **But God is the God of surprises. Even after more than 200 years the Link shall have a new life that no one could have expected.**

Over the last three years, there have been many critical milestones along the whole project timeline, all of which might have stopped us in our tracks – it's too difficult, it's too expensive, there are too many risks, too many objections. **But all along the way, those major milestones just kept pointing to where God finally wanted us to be.** All the big decisions fell our way, some in almost miraculous ways. It now feels as if we are blessed and assured that it was always what God intended. **Even so, when I arrived in the parish six years ago, no one was expecting us to be building a community hub!**

Just like our lives, the work of Christian ministry in this parish has its own Easter story to tell. There is new life and new hope.

The UK Church Story

Two weeks ago, some new survey data was released about national church attendance in the UK. Every few years the Bible Society run a big survey about it, which is taken very seriously, and it's normally bad news. **For decades it's been an expected story of further decline for the Christian faith in our shores.** Apparently after 2,000 years no one in the UK needs the care and hope of Jesus Christ anymore.

But I've never been convinced by that conclusion. Yes, the numbers fall, but I see **no fall** in the need around us **for an Easter hope that reaches deep into people.** Nothing else that society attempts to provide for itself can touch people's lives with the same tranquillity that the Christian faith can – not even weight loss pills!

So, two weeks ago, the Bible Society published their most recent survey, and that shows the UK church is expanding and growing (especially in the younger generation). We are not talking about a few percent here, rather more like 50% growth since 2018. Yet all the popular imagery you are fed of the church, tries to tell you that is not supposed to be happening. Many think the church will be just a lifeless body. **Yet it is, quite unexpectedly. On the one hand,** around me I can see the need for real truth and faith *ever more* in our society, **and on the other hand** I've never believed the glossy 'be happy' stories of what we should all be and have and do.

Anyone listened to the news in recent months and weeks must be wondering what truth and order mean any more. Perhaps that is why more people are searching for meaning? Such meaningful truth and order *is available* in Christ as so many are discovering, and rediscovering. **No, we did not expect to find ourselves here. But once again, the Christian faith and the place of the church in the UK also has its own Easter story to tell. There is new life and new hope again.**

The Followers of Jesus

On the first day of the week, at early dawn, the women came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them, saying, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, he has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.'

Later, Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

That was the first-person experience of the perplexing resurrection of Jesus Christ, opening a better life for us all, an amazing, **unexpected ending** which still brings powerful hope and renewal like nothing else ever can or will. **Yet all the way through the gospel story it seems like the strangest outcome.**

Not only that, but all those of Jesus's family, friends and followers, those who set their lives upon him, and received healing from him, all these were *devastated* at his arrest, trial and death – '*there can be no more truth or hope*', they might have said. **Jesus had brought the best of love, care and attention to everyone, yet he was rejected and killed in a most awful way. That surely ranks as the best ending if you expect total lifeless, hopeless, despair.** In his life, Jesus had spoken of, and demonstrated, the new *living* story of God's *unlimited* love for his world. Yet it seems like he was abandoned for it in a way that looked like the end.

All the woes of mankind fall within the experience of Jesus Christ and those who surrounded him. But his followers, the first church, would come to understand that all the *hopes* of mankind were to be found in him too. **The disciples did not expect to find themselves meeting the risen Lord Jesus Christ that day, but oh what joy. It was new life, new hope again.**

<pause>

And we can have continual new life because of that first Easter – as individuals (I did), as a church (and we are still here serving more), and as a society (as the growth numbers tell us). All unexpected, but expectation and risk mean nothing to God.

Easter provides the ultimate shape of hope because of what happened in Jerusalem on Easter Day all those years ago - and it can happen again (and it does). **Easter is active still and available to you. That is what you *should* expect.**

Amen