

The Unexpected God *A sermon on Mark 16:1–8*

Have you ever watched a film and had the ending completely floor you? That moment when everything you thought you understood gets turned on its head and you're left thinking — *wow. I did not see that coming.*

The obvious example, of course, is *The Sixth Sense*. The whole film follows a psychologist who is desperately trying to help a little boy who can see dead people. The boy is troubled, isolated, terrified. The psychologist is patient, caring, devoted to helping this child. And then — and I'm so sorry if you haven't seen it, but it's been thirty years, so here we are — we discover that the psychologist died at the very beginning of the film. We've been watching a dead man try to help a boy who could see dead people all along. And we never saw it coming.

That is the power of the unexpected. It catches us completely off guard.

Now, unexpected doesn't always mean bad. It can be wonderful — joyful, even breathtaking. But by its very nature, it is not what we were prepared for. And that is precisely what makes it so extraordinary. The unexpected stops us in our tracks. It demands our attention so much more than the anticipated does.

And in our Gospel reading this morning, the unexpected is absolutely everywhere.

The Unexpected Servant

Let's begin at the start of our reading. Joseph of Arimathea — a member of the Sanhedrin, the very council that had condemned Jesus — goes to Pilate and requests the body. Stop for a moment and let that sink in. This is not a disciple. This is not a family member. This is a man from the institution that had just

orchestrated the crucifixion of Jesus. And yet here he is, stepping forward when everyone else has stepped back.

Now, Joseph had not agreed with his fellow council members. He had disagreed with the verdict. But he was still Sanhedrin. And in going to Pilate, in identifying himself as someone who cared about what happened to Jesus, he was stepping out of the shadows and into the light — and that was a brave and dangerous thing to do. He is wrapping the body, laying it in a tomb, performing an act of deep compassion. Normally this would fall to a relative or a close friend. But his mother Mary was overwhelmed with grief, and the disciples — with the exception of John — had fled in fear. So it falls to this unexpected man. An unlikely hero. A servant from the last place anyone would have looked.

But then notice something remarkable within this already remarkable act: Pilate *gives* him the body. For a Roman governor to release the body of a man convicted of high treason — not to a family member, but to a peripheral acquaintance — was almost unheard of. And perhaps that tells us something. Perhaps Pilate's willingness to let the body go quietly suggests he never truly believed the charge. Perhaps the conviction of Jesus was, as we now understand it, one of political expediency rather than genuine justice.

We have an unexpected within an unexpected. And we've only just got going.

The Unexpected Stone

Now the women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — are making their way to the tomb in the early morning. They are carrying spices to anoint the body. It is a tender, faithful act. They are doing what they can. But as they walk, there is a very practical problem growing in their minds. I imagine the conversation going something like this:

"But did you see the size of that stone?! It's set into a groove — how on earth are we going to move it? Do you think there'll be anyone around to help us?"

Their focus is entirely on the obstacle. And it's an entirely reasonable concern. The stone is large, it is heavy, it is immovable — at least by them. And yet when they arrive at the tomb, the stone has already been moved. Unexpectedly. Without them asking, without them arranging it, without them even quite believing it could happen — it's done.

This is what I would call the *unbeckoned God* at work. God who does not wait to be invited. God who acts before we have finished worrying about whether it is even possible. The women went to the tomb expecting an obstacle. What they found was an open door.

And inside? A young man, dressed in white. An angel — a messenger — because this moment demanded a word from God to explain what the empty tomb meant. And the message he brings is the most unexpected message in all of human history:

"Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here."

He has been raised.

Not *he has escaped*. Not *the body has been moved*. Raised. Resurrected. The explanation for the empty tomb is not theft or mistake or tragedy — it is God breaking into the world again in a way that no one, absolutely no one, was prepared for.

They came looking for a body. They found a messenger and an empty tomb.

The Unexpected Restoration

There is one more detail I want to draw your attention to: the angel specifically tells the women to go and tell *the disciples and Peter*.

Peter. Singled out by name.

Why? We know why. We know what Peter did. In the courtyard, by the fire, when the pressure came, Peter denied three times that he even knew Jesus. The one who had declared "*You are the Messiah*" now said "*I do not know the man.*" If anyone might have thought himself excluded from the good news of the resurrection, it was Peter. If anyone might have assumed that the morning of the empty tomb was not for him — that whatever came next, he had disqualified himself from it — it was Peter.

And yet God singles him out. By name. *Go and tell the disciples — and Peter.*

God's grace reaches into the exact place where Peter expected only shame, and it says: *you are not excluded. You have not been left out. You are still one of them.* This is not just good news about an empty tomb. This is personal restoration. This is the unexpected kindness of God reaching into the worst moment of a man's life and saying *you are still mine.*

The Unexpected Ending

And then the women run. They are terrified and amazed in equal measure, and — at least in this original ending of Mark's Gospel — they say nothing to anyone, because they are afraid.

I find that deeply human. Even the witnesses to the resurrection needed a moment to catch their breath. Even the first people to hear this news had to gather themselves before they could speak it. And yet we know they did,

eventually, find their voices. Because here we are, two thousand years later, still talking about it.

So what does this mean for us?

God has a long history of showing up in unexpected ways, through unexpected people, at unexpected moments.

Joseph of Arimathea reminds us that God often uses the person we'd least expect. Are we, like Joseph, waiting until it feels safe to be bold for Christ? Because the cross calls us out of the shadows. Not when we have it all figured out, not when the timing is perfect — but now, in whatever small act of compassion or courage we are capable of today.

The women remind us that we often spend our energy focused on the obstacle — the stone that seems immovable — when God has already been at work ahead of us. What obstacle are you approaching this week convinced that you'll have to move it yourself? What if you arrived and it was already gone?

And Peter reminds us that God's grace is personal. It is not a general announcement broadcast to the crowd. It finds us where we are — in our shame, in our failure, in our fear — and it calls us by name.

The God we worship is not a God who behaves predictably. He is not domesticated, not tame, not confined to the places we expect to find him. He is the unbeckoned God, the God of the empty tomb, the God who turns up before we ask, who works through people we'd never have chosen, who rolls away stones we thought were immovable.

We might go looking for a corpse. We might find a messenger instead.

And the message, as unexpected and world-upending as it was then, is the same today:

He has been raised. He is not here.

Amen.