

4.7.2024 Easter 1 “Low Sunday”

There were four country churches in a small Texas town: The Presbyterian church, the Methodist church, the Catholic church, and the Baptist church. Each church was overrun with pesky squirrels, and every church called a meeting to decide what to do about them. After much prayer and consideration, the Presbyterian church determined that the squirrels were predestined to be there, and they shouldn't interfere with God's divine will. In the Methodist church, where the squirrels had taken up habitation in the baptistery bowl, the deacons met and decided to put a cover on the bowl and drown the squirrels in it, but those pesky squirrels escaped, and there were twice as many there the next week. The Catholic congregation got together and decided that they weren't in a position to harm any of God's creation. So, they humanely trapped the squirrels and set them free a few miles outside of town. Three days later, the squirrels were back. Finally, the Baptist church met, and came up with the most effective solution. They baptized the squirrels, registered them as members of the church, and now they only see them on Christmas and Easter.

After celebrating the joy of our Lord's Resurrection with a crowd on Easter Day, the first Sunday after Easter can feel quite different. This Sunday is often referred to as Low Sunday, and while this term was most likely intended to contrast the difference between the great Easter feast and the Sunday that follows, many people jokingly suggest it's more accurate to call this Sunday “low” because of the decrease in both attendance and enthusiasm, but I wonder, is there such a thing as a “low Sunday,” or is this simply our mistaken perception?

In our day, many people refer to the Sunday after Easter as low, but when we read the Gospel accounts that record the events of the first Easter morning, we find many people who mistakenly believed that Easter Day would be a low Sunday. For example, early on Easter morning, when Mary Magdalene arrived at the tomb “*when it was yet dark*” (John 20:1), her reaction is not enthusiasm and joy, but confusion and sorrow. After saying to Peter and John, “*They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid Him,*” she “*stood weeping outside the tomb*” (John 20:2,11), so overcome by her own grief that when our Lord appeared to her, she

thought He was the gardener. On the first Easter morning, Mary was so low, so burdened by her own misguided thoughts of sorrow and death that she couldn't see Life as He stood right in front of her.

Another example of disciples who thought that the first Easter Day would be a low Sunday is found in the heartache and despair felt by Cleopas and another disciple who were traveling toward Emmaus that day. Scripture tells us that as these disciples walked, they were discussing the tragedy of our Lord's crucifixion and death, and the mystery of the empty tomb. They spoke of Jesus as "*a man who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people,*" they recalled how the "*chief priests and rulers delivered Him up to be condemned to death, and crucified Him,*" and lamented "*we had hoped that He was the one to redeem Israel*" (Luke 24:19-21). Like Mary Magdalene, the initial Easter experience for these disciples was not the joy of a high feast day, but instead confusion, heartache, sorrow, and despair.

The historical account of the first Easter also describes most of our Lord's Apostles as men who were far from rejoicing on that day, for they'd been hiding in fear since the time of our Lord's arrest on Holy Thursday. When Mary Magdalene came to Peter and John, they raced to see the empty tomb, but it appears the others remained in the upper room, behind locked doors, fearing what may happen to them if they were found by the Jewish authorities (John 20:19). It would be reasonable for these men to believe that if our Lord's enemies could have Him crucified, then His closest followers, those who were trusted with His message, may very well suffer the same fate - a low Sunday indeed.

The experience shared by Christians on the first Easter Day was, at least for a time, very low, very different than the joyful alleluias we sing on Easter Day, but after our own journey through Lent and Holy Week, their initial feelings of fear, confusion, and heartache are easy for us to understand. Through the Scriptures, we heard the praise offered to Jesus on Palm Sunday turn to shouts of crucify Him. We were there when Judas betrayed Him, Peter denied Him, His friends abandoned Him, and the Romans killed Him. We know that Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried on Friday, and that His body lay dead in the tomb on Saturday. Would anyone expect Sunday morning to be any different?

We wouldn't, because too often we don't have eyes to see beyond what we would naturally expect. Mary Magdalene came to the tomb on Easter Day carrying "*sweet spices*" to anoint our Lord's body (Mark 16:1) because she expected to find Him dead. Then, when the unexpected happened, when His body wasn't there, instead of remembering His words, "*Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up*" (John 2:19), Mary held on to what she expected to find, and came to the conclusion that someone had taken our Lord's body. She couldn't see beyond what she expected to see, and it wasn't until later, when the man she thought was the gardener called her by name, that those limited, natural expectations were shattered, her eyes were opened, and she saw our Risen Lord.

The disciples on the road to Emmaus present us with the same scenario. As they walked, they discussed our Lord's crucifixion, and with the memory of His death heavy on their hearts, the last thing they expected to see was the Resurrected Christ. Therefore, when He joined them on this journey they didn't see Him. We're told that, like Mary, "*their eyes were kept from recognizing Him*" (Luke 24:16), and St. Luke writes that it wasn't until Jesus was at the table with them, when He "*took the bread and blessed and broke it and gave it to them*" that "*their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him.*" Their limited, natural expectations were shattered when our Lord and God "*was known to them in the breaking of the bread*" (Luke 24:30-35).

The same thing also occurred among the Apostles hiding in the upper room. Even after they'd heard from Mary Magdalene, Peter, John, and the disciples that came from Emmaus, these men didn't expect to see our Lord, and so when Jesus appeared to them and said, "*Peace be unto you,*" they were "*startled and frightened and thought they saw a spirit*" (Luke 24:36-37). His closest followers, who He lived with and taught for three years, who repeatedly heard Him speak of His death and Resurrection were also limited by their own expectations. Even they were kept from recognizing Him because of what they thought was possible, and so Jesus encouraged them to open their eyes by saying, "*see my hands and my feet, that it is I myself.*" He shattered their expectations by inviting them to "*Touch Me, and see*" (Luke 24:39).

Jesus said to those disciples who failed to recognize Him, *“O foolish ones, how slow are your hearts to believe all that the prophets have spoken!”* (Luke 24:25), and aren't we often just as foolish and slow to believe. Our limited expectations, our unbelief, so often prevents us from seeing the Risen Lord in our daily life, and yet the fact remains, as these examples illustrate, that though we may fail to recognize Him - God is with us. Every example we talked about reveals that truth. Mary Magdalene believed she was speaking to the gardener, but she was standing in the presence of the Lord, talking with Him. The disciples on the road to Emmaus thought they were walking with just another traveler, but it was the Lord who was right beside them. The Apostles hiding in the upper room thought they had seen a spirit, but it was the Resurrected Christ who asked them, *“Do you have anything here to eat?”* (Luke 24:41).

“O foolish ones...” how slow are our hearts to believe! How often does what we expect to see in this world hinder our ability to see the Risen Christ? How often has our Resurrected Lord, without you or I even realizing it, been the One speaking words of life to us as we stand by the grave in sorrow? How often have our eyes been kept from recognizing Him as He walks with us in our despair on a lonely road? How many times has Jesus entered our room with His offer of peace, yet our slow hearts continue to hide in fear?

Our limited expectations don't change the truth that God is with us, they only prevent us from recognizing our Lord, and experiencing the peace and rest found in the knowledge of His presence. We must not let what we expect to see keep our eyes from seeing the Truth, for Jesus said, *“I am with you always, even unto the end of the world”* (Matthew 28:20). God's promise to us is: *“I will never leave you nor forsake you”* (Hebrews 13:5), and I can't help but think that if we would simply hear and receive the words He said, *“Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them”* (Matthew 18:20), if we would just believe Him, there would never be a “Low Sunday,” in attendance, or in enthusiasm. We would be like a bunch of pesky squirrels that you just can't keep out of His house.

God is with us. Easter Day, the empty tomb, our Risen Lord, is evidence of that promise fulfilled. May His grace shatter our limited expectations, overcome our foolish unbelief, and open the eyes of our hearts to the end that

we may see the truth, to the end that we may see our Lord and our God.