

“What to Expect When You’re Expecting” **Romans 8:14-27**

I’m not sure what women did prior to 1984. I suppose they simply didn’t “prepare” themselves for the impending arrival of their first child. But in 1984 everything changed. After 84 women purchased or were given a book that many believed “changed their life.” Chances are if you are a woman under 50 and have children you own the book or owned the book and gave it away to a friend, a neighbour or maybe your own child. And I’m not talking about the Family Bible but a book help equally in high regard by many. You’ve probably already guessed, “What to Expect When You’re Expecting” is the book to which I’m referring. My apologies to the handful who may never have heard of the book but trust me when I say, “It’s good to be prepared, it’s helpful to know “what to expect when you’re expecting.” It’s true of birth and it’s true of death.

This past Sunday we witnessed the “critical point in human history”, according to NT Wright. In other words, when Jesus exited that empty tomb something happened that might just surprise you. For many the Easter story is simply a narrative about life after death because isn’t that what Jesus did on that very first Easter Sunday – came back from the dead. And because we are “heirs with Christ” (as Paul says in Romans) are we not also promised to experience what He experienced - that we too will one day die but will also live again with Jesus in heaven? For many, Heaven then seems to be the Goal and Final Destination of the believer. We want to walk the golden streets, relax in the clouds and look down after we are gone and somehow assist our living relatives by pulling them out of the way of speeding cars. It’s what we expect, when we are expecting, but our passage this morning and even the story of the empty tomb gives a very different picture. These are not accounts, as we often believe about “life after death” but “life after life after death”. (Source: NT Wright) Allow me to explain.

There is little agreement today about what happens to people when they die. What heaven is like? Who is going to be there? Who is not going to be there? Am I going to be there? Is there even a Heaven? It may surprise you that there is not as much talk of “Heaven” in scripture as we may first think, but the few there are become sermon fodder especially for us preachers at funeral services. The most familiar being John 14 where Jesus talks about “the vastness of Heaven” or the size of God’s house that contains “many rooms,” “many mansions” or “many dwelling places.” These words have regularly been used in the context of bereavement to mean that the dead are not going to be lost in some unfamiliar world. Heaven then for many becomes a “final dwelling place.” “But the original Greek word for “dwelling place” in our John 14 passage is *monai*, which is regularly used in ancient Greek not for a final resting place, but for a temporary halt on a journey that will take you somewhere else in the long run.” (Wright) This fits closely with another familiar “funeral” passage that we believe speaks of “Heaven. Jesus’ words to the dying thief on the cross of “Today you will be with

me in paradise" (Luke 23:43) has often been misread and does not necessarily mean "Paradise" as a final destination but a "blissful garden" or as one commentator says, "The parkland of rest and tranquility, where the dead are refreshed as they await the dawn of the new day." (Wright) Now understand this is not an attempt to deny Heaven but to say Heaven is not our ultimate destination. Yes, I believe those who are "in Christ" and whose bodies no longer live are in the presence of God, in the strong hand of God. That yes, there is life after death but according to Romans 8 there is "life after life after death."

So let's begin with something we all know too well, in our own lives or the lives of our aging loved one. Like Christ we suffer and our bodies fail us and one day die. This should not surprise us but to some it does. A friend recently posted that his mid-nineties mother had "unexpectedly" passed away. We mourn with his family and are reminded that no matter the age of a parent we mourn their passing but the passing is not "unexpected". Death is a reality we all must face, no matter how much or little we change our diet, exercise, or take probiotics. All these things may lengthen our lives but they do not, they cannot, change the reality that death is something we all face – even Jesus faced it. So that is why Paul says we are "heirs in suffering" (facing death) BUT we are also "heirs to be glorified." That's the continuing story of Easter that I want us to grasp this morning and the image that is best exemplified when Jesus exited the tomb.

Laid in the tomb on Friday Jesus was dead, make no mistake about it. Jesus experienced the same thing that those who fill our cemeteries experienced. He died. But something happened that the original audience and many today could not fathom. On Sunday, Easter Sunday to be exact, Jesus rose again. He did not "come back to life" like Lazarus. He was not "reincarnated" into his same body but was **resurrected**. What does that mean? Well we know he was alive, physically alive after he came out of the tomb because we read accounts following the Easter story that Jesus did things that prove he was alive, like eat. But there was also something "different" about Jesus. Do you remember last Sunday's Easter story of Mary not recognizing Jesus when he came out of the tomb– that is until he spoke her name? (John 20:16) How did she not know Jesus? Or do you recall Jesus appearing to the Emmaus Road travelers (Luke 24:13-32) following Easter and they too did not recognize Jesus until he broke bread with them? How did they not know Jesus? The only answer is resurrection. Jesus was alive but different, physically different, after he arose. Such a belief is spoken briefly in the Old Testament of David's ancestors being "raised up" (2 Samuel 7:12) or in Daniel 12. But by the first century the idea of resurrection or as Paul called it: the "redemption of our bodies" (Rom 8:23) was clearly understood as life after, life after death. Following the Fall in the Garden we need to understand that our bodies and creation were not to be like modern electronics – thrown away upon their demise. Yes we are dying and yes, one only need look around to see that creation is also dying.

But hope is not found in escaping this body and this world (like Canadian snow birds flocking to Florida) but in resurrection.

Paul says that our real hope lies in the reality that God will do a new thing – not an easy thing but a new thing and Jesus is that paradigm. This is what Paul means when he speaks of “labour pains.” Here is creation longing to be made new. It is awaiting a new birth, freedom from the pain. And humanity, likewise longs for “the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23) just like Jesus. Jesus exited the tomb with this “new body;” a critical point of history occurred. As one authors has written, “The world was put on notice upon Jesus resurrection that Jesus was now not just King of the World but was under new management.” (Wright) Notice there was no talk of Heaven or a deep desire to escape to Heaven by the disciples or even the wish of the early church for that matter after Jesus stepped out of the tomb. Instead the early church saw this event as a present reality and not just a future hope. “Remember me,’ (the dying thief) says, ‘when you come in your kingdom,’ implies that the resurrection of Jesus set in motion this new age. There will, of course, be a future completion involving ultimate resurrection but the future hope has come forward into the present. Those who have died believing are in the presence of Christ, make no mistake about it, and this is a glorious thought for even Paul wrote in Philippians 1 that to “be with Christ” is far better but Paul and the early church knew that escapism was not the ultimate goal of the Christian. Every time we see our decaying world decay even more (under our watch, as it were) and every time we see the ravages of cancer, for example, we are reminded that “this is not the way it is supposed to be, but it’s also a reminder that even these bodies and this creation will one day be made new. Do you know how we often look at someone whose life is ravaged by age and disease and we say something like, “They are simply a shadow of their former selves” well in reality we can also look at our own bodies and proclaim, “That our bodies are but a shadow of our future selves.” Let there be no mistake that just as Christ exited the empty tomb he will one day return and all things will be made new including our disembodied spirits. For God’s ultimate purpose is resurrection. And therefore resurrection becomes the mission of the church.

“In the anticipation then of that time when God will fill the earth with his glory, transform the old heavens and earth into the new, and raise his children from the dead to populate and rule over the redeemed world he has made, the church claims this world in advance as the place of God's kingdom, of Jesus' Lordship, and of the Spirit's power” (Wright) and we live accordingly. Resurrection life is not about simply waiting and watching and looking up into the skies for Jesus’ return and to make all things new rather it is about building God’s Kingdom here as it is in Heaven. And if this place, our home, is going to be the place where the New Jerusalem comes down (Revelation 21 and 22) then we take this “sacred space” seriously. “We are then a church who goes from being a

worshipping community to “debating in the council chamber; to discussing matters of town planning, of harmonizing and humanizing beauty in architecture, green spaces, and road traffic schemes; and to environmental work, creative and healthy farming methods, and proper use of resources.” If because of the resurrection and the Lordship of Christ coming to fruition then the world belongs to God and it is holy and we can therefore not sit idle when it is being spoiled or defaced. As Wright continues, “This is not an ‘extra’ to the church's mission. It is central. The church that takes seriously the fact that Jesus is Lord of all will not just celebrate quietly every time we write the date on a letter or document, will not just set aside Sunday as far as humanly and socially possible as a celebration of God's new creation, will not just seek to order its own life in an appropriate rhythm of worship and work. Such a church will also seek to bring wisdom to the rhythms of work in offices and shops, in local government, in civic holidays, and in the shaping of public life. These things cannot be taken for granted.” Sunday as simple “another day” shows how our world drifts aimlessly with every social current. We therefore need to reclaim even time itself as belonging to God and not simply an extra to the church’s mission but central. “The church is called going straight from worshipping Jesus to making a radical difference in the material lives of people by running playgroups, helping people work their way up the financial ladder, campaigning for better houses, against dangerous road, drug rehabs centers, wise laws, for decent library and sporting facilities, (opening our lives, our wallets and our homes to refugees) and for a thousand other things in which God's sovereign rule extends to hard, concrete reality. Once again, all this is not an extra to the mission of the church. It is central.

When the church is seen to move straight from worship God to affecting much-needed change in the world; when it becomes clear that the people who feast at Jesus' table are the ones at the forefront of work to eliminate hunger and famine; when people realize that those who pray for the Spirit to work in and through them are the people who seem to have extra resources of love and patience in caring for those whose lives are damaged, bruised, and shamed—then it is natural for people to recognize that something is going on that they want to be part of. No single individual can attempt more than a fraction of this mission. That's why mission is the work of the whole church, the whole time,” writes NT Wright. And it’s all because of resurrection. I need to tell you that the men’s choir was ready to sing another piece than the one they will sing in a few minutes. I know the piece well for it was sung in my church growing up. But its message is the exact opposite of the message of Romans 8 so I asked Ian and the guys to wait. They could have sung, “This world is not my home. I’m just a passing through.” But this world (maybe not this world) but this world is our future home. On a day of God’s choosing Jesus will return to make all things new – creation and us – life after life after death. And until that day we help build God’s Kingdom as it is in Heaven. Thanks be to God.

(I am indebted to NT Wright for this message, especially his application at the end of this message)