Isn’t it great to have spring finally here! Or at least signs of spring. The grass is getting greener, flowers are beginning to bloom, birds are singing, and we're feeling good that winter is over. But this morning, I want to take you back to winter for just a moment, to last Christmas. Because one of my favorite traditions at Christmas is to watch the movie, *A Christmas Carol*, based on the novel written by Charles Dickens. We all know the story with Scrooge, Bob Crachett, Tiny Tim. And the first chapter tells us, “Old Marley was dead as a door nail. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate.” Dead as a door nail. This must be distinctly understood or nothing wonderful can come from the story I am going to relate. Because in the story, Scrooge experiences a spiritual resurrection as a gift from his dead friend Jacob Marley, who’s gone ahead of him so to speak, and who comes back from the dead, as a ghost, and warns Scrooge to change his ways or he’ll end up like Marley. Scrooge acts on what Marley tells and shows him, and he is transformed into a new and better person.

And as I thought about today, Easter Day, those opening lines that Dickens uses to introduce his great story work perfectly to describe the Easter story, the greatest story ever told. Because, Jesus too, was dead as a door nail. This must be perfectly understood or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to tell you today. As my colleague, Rev. Anne Robertson puts it, “There’s nothing much to tell on Easter unless Jesus is completely and totally dead to begin with. The women who came to Jesus’ tomb on Easter morning knew that Jesus was dead. They were there at his crucifixion from beginning to end. They saw him die. They saw him taken down limp from the cross, and they followed as he was taken and placed in the tomb. It was too late in the day on that Friday for the women to clean and anoint his dead body, because the Jewish Sabbath began at sunset, and continued through the next day; and according to Jewish law, no work could be done. So when they finally arrived at the tomb early on Sunday morning to attend to his body and to pay their respects, they expected Jesus to still be there. His body would be in worse shape than when they took him down from the cross, but he would still be there, and he would still be quite dead.

When they got to the tomb, however, things were not what they expected, not what they anticipated. There was no dead body, just an angel with some strange news that Jesus was alive and had gone ahead
of them to Galilee. And how do the women respond? Well, if you'll excuse the pun, they were scared stiff. Jesus was not in the tomb, he was gone, and they were afraid and confused. In fact, the angel tells them, “Do not be afraid.” But I think we can understand their reaction, can’t we? Because that’s the way we often react to situations and problems in our lives that are unexpected or unanticipated – with fear, insecurity and confusion.\(^1\) Because I know many of us here today are dealing with difficult situations and issues, and we are suffering and hurting in oh, so many ways. I mean, just look at our lives. Doesn’t it seem like every minute of our day is filled – filled with demands like work, filled with caring for children or grandchildren or parents, filled with all the pressures and baggage of modern day existence like the cost of gas and food and prom dresses and sports equipment. Add on top of that, illness, family issues, and other stresses, and it’s no wonder many of us do not feel satisfied or fulfilled in our lives, and in fact, may feel some doubt or despair or anxiety about our future. And we plod on in our predictable pattern and we do nothing to change things. A pastor I knew once said, “Most people feel more comfortable with the hell of a predictable situation, then the joy of an unpredictable change.” And this is especially true when it comes to our faith and the meaning of Easter. I imagine many of us expect to come here today and just pay our respects to a God that we have compartmentalized. A God that fits into our busy schedules and our pressure filled lives. A God that is limited by the amount of time and effort and prayer and faith and trust we have in Him. A God that we've molded into an image we’re comfortable with and have put into a tomb-like box. Because most of us, if we're honest with ourselves, are very uncomfortable with the God who is missing from that tomb, that box. A God that lives! A God that, at any moment, might show up and start making a real impact on us, causing unexpected changes in our lives.

Because if there's one thing that’s true about our Almighty God, it’s that you can expect the unexpected. I mean, we would expect God to come to earth with majesty and fanfare; instead, he comes as a baby lying in a stable. We would expect God to be surrounded with riches and wealth; instead, he lived as the son of a poor peasant family. We expect God to come pronouncing judgment on those who do wrong; instead, he befriends sinners, eats with them, and forgives wayward sons and adulterous daughters. We expect God to lift up the powerful, the influential, the high-ranking, the important; instead he speaks out for the poor, the suffering, the oppressed, and the least of these. We expect God might turn away in revulsion from this sinful, evil, corrupt world and leave us to our own devices; instead God so loved the world, that he gave up his own Son so that we might live with Him

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\(^1\) Anne Robertson sermon, The Living Christ, Easter 1998
forever. And we certainly expect a dead man to stay dead; instead the Son of God defeats the worse evil that humankind can throw at him – scourging, crucifixion and death, and yet he rises up to live among us. And that living God can do unexpected things in your life if you just let him.

We heard the angel say today, “I know you are looking for Jesus, but he isn’t here! He is risen from the dead. Go and tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to…Cape Cod. You will see him there.” You all heard that, didn’t you? You see, Galilee, is really just a metaphor for any place we live our daily lives. The disciples had come from Galilee. It was where they lived and loved and worked. Galilee was where weddings took place and babies were born, it’s where illness stuck and death occurred, it was where arguments erupted, tears were shed, sorrow was felt. And Jesus was going ahead of them to meet them there and be with them there, and do the unexpected. And this same Jesus is going ahead of us to meet us in our daily lives as well. Where he will do the unexpected. For just look at how the living God works. Let’s start with the disciples. Those same men who ran away from Jesus at his death, in fear and insecurity and confusion, now meet the risen Christ, the living God, and they are transformed. Changed into men who go out fearlessly and confidently sharing their faith, and in the process, change the entire course of history by building Christ’s church. This church that you are sitting in today. Expect the unexpected.

Or consider this. For most of us here, probably the greatest collective tragedy we have known or felt happened on 9/11. And after we found out about the event, we knew what to expect. We knew there would be fear and suffering and despair and death. What we did not expect was that the living Christ had already gone ahead of us to that place. Because when the workers were clearing away the debris at Ground Zero, they found at the base of what had been the World Trade Center, a piece of destroyed steel structure that had been fused in such a way that it made a perfectly symmetrical cross. You’ve all seen the pictures. And it was immediately “raised” over the wreckage. The New York Times said, “The cross is an inspiration to the workers and others.” Nobody had to explain why. You see, two thousand years ago when Jesus was hanging on that cross, he didn’t let fear and suffering and despair and death set the agenda. He defeated it, overcame it. And he did the same in that tragedy in New York. Expect the unexpected.

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2 Eugene Bay, A Sower Went Out
Here’s another. What do you expect when you think “rock star?” Loud music, alcohol, drugs, loose living, wild hair, etc. Well, Jesus went ahead…to Dublin, Ireland, and met Paul Hewson, better known as Bono, the lead singer of the rock band, U2. Bono is a Christian, and one day while praying for AIDS victims in Africa, and the children who were orphaned because of AIDS, he heard the living God tell him to do something. And he did. To this point, the rock star, Bono, has raised over ten billion dollars, yes, ten billion, to help in the AIDS relief, changing lives, offering hope, healing and new life. Expect the unexpected.

And, Jesus goes ahead of you, too. In fact, “In one way or another, you are all here today because the risen, living Christ is ahead of you.” Bishop Will Willimon reminds us that, “When we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, when we come to the end of our rope, when the world seems to get the best of us, time and time again we look up and realize that we are not walking by ourselves. We come to some dead-end in life, we look over the brink, into the dark abyss, and to our surprise and delight there he is waiting for us as a light in the darkness. We pick up the morning paper and read all the bad news, all the wars, all the political wheeling and dealing, and then comes the risen Christ, in the form of all those who want what God wants…peace and justice, and confronts and overpowers those who think they are in charge. We give up and give in to despair only to be surprised to find Christ near to us, lifting us.”

That is power of this Easter story. And trust me, as a pastor I have seen the unexpected in so many Galilees of life. I have seen forgiveness and grace bring about reunion and reconciliation. I have seen despair melt away and hope restored. I have seen failure turned into success. I have seen addictions cured. I have seen health restored. I have seen compassion replace bitterness. I’ve seen direction replace confusion. I have seen peace in the midst of turmoil. I have seen adopted children from around the world with no hope, given new life and hope right here in this congregation. Yes, I’ve seen hope and love and transformation and resurrection. Yes, the living God is there for you. In a world of pain and suffering and sorrow and evil and despair, He is there to surprise you with the unexpected gifts of mercy, peace, joy, goodness, love and meaning for your life. I’ve seen the unexpected. And so have you. And there is no need to fear. Yes Jesus was dead as a doornail. But now he lives. He goes ahead of you. Listen to him learn from him, be with him. And everything wonderful that you might want in your life can come from this story.

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3 Will Willimon, To Galilee