

**The Cost of Good Spice**  
**“There’s something more to be seen.”**  
**Mark 16:1-8**

*Last in the Lenten and Easter series, “Open Hearts”*

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**Expecting the Expected**

There’s no telling what exists in the darkness, no matter how hard or long you peer into it. I was one of the last in the group to leave Cliff Palace on a guided tour at Mesa Verde, the National Park that preserves and presents the ancient dwellings of Native Americans who lived in incredible adobe and stone dwellings built into the cliff sides of the American Southwest. With only a few of us left dawdling, the park ranger invited us to poke our heads into a doorway. I poked my head inside and what I mostly saw was the darkness. Yet, something told me to take a picture; so I reached inside with my camera pointing upwards and with an activated flash I clicked a couple of pictures. I had no idea what I had taken. Yet, what I expected was nothing more than plain walls, slowly crumbling in the same manner as they did

All I expected was *the expected*. But the developed film showed what the eye could not have seen. The sudden flash of light showed that the floor between the first and second levels was missing, exposing the living area above. And, surprise! My camera picked up the decor of the walls: fascinating pictographs: scenes of the surrounding landscape, the mountain horizon and the sky up above with sun and moon...and curious objects in the sky that could play with your imagination to no end. Who were these people? What did they see? The pictures seemed to raise more questions than they answered...something there, which, in the darkness, no one would have been able to see.

There are realities in this life that you can’t see. Mary, Mary, and Salome approached the tomb holding Jesus as first light. Sun had just risen, yet the shadows of the night had not yet all fled. They were still, in a sense, walking in the darkness. The shadows of Friday still held them. On they walked to finish the task of letting go of Jesus and all the promise of a new day he had brought to the world. All they expected was a dark tomb with a corpse. After all, as far as they knew, that’s all there was.

## **There is More**

If they were right, it would make sense that they should invest themselves in the darkness. Isn't accepting reality for what it is and making the best of it a good description, even, of sound mental health?

Just think of what you've come to expect. Just think of this. Some friends of mine were talking about the ideas of peace and justice that were important to Jesus. You know: forgive others, love your enemy, and turn the other cheek. We all thought that those principles might be hard to apply, but could work between individuals. But when we tried to think about nations living like that it was another story. After all, you can't really expect to reason with a terrorist, could you? Do you think the Chinese would really give us a break? It seems a given that international relations are forever locked in warfare and competition in which any gain one people enjoys will always be at another's expense. We've come to expect it.

Once I became an adult, my father explained why he was so reserved about showing me much about car repair when I was younger, even though he spent his career in automotive research and development. He said that he didn't want me to feel like I had to choose that as my field. It wasn't that he had anything against engineering or the auto industry, but he didn't want me to think I had to go into that field because of him. He wanted me to be free to choose. In fact, he would have rather become a photographer or a history teacher; but years away in the Army during the War had made him put his life on hold and he never felt like he had the opportunity to change a course he had started right out of high school. He soon had a family and obligations and was basically stuck where he was. He didn't want me to be stuck by what I might think were his expectations.

I wonder how many people are stuck. Not only are people stuck in unsatisfying careers – you might be stuck with an addiction from tobacco or prescription drugs. You might be stuck with stuck in a relationship with a spouse or a partner or a friend that is either chronically conflicted. You could be resigned to the fact that you've gone down a road that's left you less than physically fit, with it's what they've come to expect. You might feel like a spiritual lightweight, ever to be disappointed by your relationship with God. You might have felt stuck in some poor choice you made a long time ago that, ever since, has defined you as "not good enough."

Stuck, in the dark: I know life can get to be a matter of figuring out just how to cope. How do you make the best of a bad situation? So, most people come to invest in making do.

Mary, Mary, and Joanna invested in spice. After all, Jesus was dead. Then, in their darkness they prepared to make his burial complete. Nowadays, you do that by calling the funeral director and a pastor who will care for you and help you make the arrangements and get through it all so you can eventually get on with your life. In the end, it will probably cost you several thousand dollars.

It wasn't so different for them. It probably helped that a wealthy sympathizer had donated his tomb – a generous gift for a poor band of dreamers. But the cost of the spices! I tried to figure out how much it took to purchase the 100 pounds of aloes and myrrh it's said they were going to have to use.<sup>1</sup> I estimated that it must have been around \$3,300 in today's U.S. currency.<sup>2</sup> \$3,300, the cost of good spice, is what they had invested in Jesus' death.<sup>2</sup>

Expecting only the expected, they looked only into the darkness and thought that what they were seeing was all there would be.

And then there was light.

The stone was removed. The grave was open and occupied: not by a corpse but an angel. "You are looking for Jesus," he says. "He has been raised; he is not here."

This is not just a metaphor for life and the surprising turns it can take. It's not just a symbol for the recovery of spring after a long and snowy winter. It is not just a message to hang in there heroically after a crushing disappointment or loss.

The empty tomb is first and foremost the event that changes everything. In the end, God did not abandon Jesus in death. He was resurrected: the first among us to rise from the shadows to everlasting light. And if you believe, you are given the spiritual perception to know what's been shrouded in the darkness. What you thought was the end is really the beginning of life. His words are raised once again. His mission is put to work once again. His power is released into the world once-and-for-all. Hope is established, exposed by the light of God's love, and visible for all to see.

And all of our lives (yes, yours as well) are no longer defined by their limitations, but are reshaped by this one hope.

This changes everything.

## Hope

When my father died, the task of going through volumes of pictures for proper funeral home display was not a very welcome thought. Fortunately, the picture boards from my parents' 50<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary were still in tact and needed only a few adjustments that my sister and I could easily handle.

The first day for visitation at the funeral home, I drove to my parents' house with a handful of pictures for the collages and for a visit with their pastor. It's strange to have the tables turned. Now I was the object of pastoral care, answering the questions I usually ask.

I had just stopped at a store to purchase some shirts while talking on my cell phone: two different calls at once. The poor cashier heard way-too-much information. Then on I went. There were so many things to be done, and I was completing them in order, dealing, I guess, with the reality that my dad was really gone.

Click, click: the tasks were getting completed. I arrived at my mother's house; my sister was already there. Still waiting for the pastor, I walked back to my father's bedroom with my pictures, finding the picture boards leaning up against the bed.

Shadows washed the room.

Then I saw it. It was a picture already posted: one I suppose I'd already seen though before it hadn't made an impression. Mom and Dad had been to the Holy Land, I think the last major trip they had. And there was the picture: Dad looking up at the camera, bright-eyed and smiling in the sun, emerging from Jesus' tomb. The room brightened.

The sight of it changed everything. It said everything. It was angel's very proclamation of hope. It opened my eyes to a reality that needed to be seen.

Because of Jesus, death is not about death. And whatever the darkness, the darkness is not all there is.

Today for you may the shadows disperse. May you examine an illumined tomb and see it's empty. May you see Jesus: alive and giving you the hope that brings life.

## References

- [1] John 19:39
- [2] The price of myrrh was figured from Variable Herbal Solutions (Morrisville, PA), <http://www.viableherbalsolutions.com/singles/herbs/s868.htm>. The price of aloe was obtained from Desert Harvest (Colorado Springs, CO) price lists, <http://www.desertharvest.com/av-history.html>.