

The Fifth Sunday of Lent
April 2, 2017

Text: John 11:1-53
Theme: “Rising Expectations”

Expectations—how have your expectations panned out for the NCAA tournament? If you are speaking of the women, it’s easy—expect UConn to win. But with the men it’s not so cut and dry. Many expectations have been crushed by this point. Some have seen their teams exceed expectations. Other fans, like those following Kentucky, expect their team to make at least the final four. Only two teams left and after tomorrow night no more expectations, just history.

How have your expectations for 2017 been panning out? We are now a quarter of the way through the year. Some expectations have been exceeded, other have not been fulfilled. It’s usually a mixed bag, but as you look back over the years you can probably remember some years in which more expectations were met. It is the time of year of expecting graduations, some expecting employment. Whether graduation or not, it is the time of year of expecting the end of the school year. There may be eager energy in the classroom made all the more eager with warm weather.

Expectations, plenty of those in our text from John 11. There were both hopeful and fearful expectations. There were rising expectations, rising expectations on that day and rising expectations for the end of days. There was only one who knew the reality of the rising expectation about to unfold before their eyes.

There were rising expectations concerning this one, expectations that he could just be the One. There were the signs that John likes to refer to. No, not signs like “Reduced Speed Ahead,” or “Slow Children Playing”, or “This Space Available.” These signs were markers, like arrows pointing to Jesus. “Hey, look what just happened! This is not an ordinary event. This is no ordinary man!” Some of those miracles had happened away from Jerusalem. John says the first was at Cana in Galilee where Jesus turned water into wine. Not many knew what had happened when it happened, but the disciples knew. We read in John 2, “[They] believed in Him.” (vs 11) By the Sea of Galilee He had fed 5000 men plus women and children with five loaves and two fish. That sign was quite well known. Later that day, actually that night, Jesus walked on water to join His disciples in the boat (John 6:16-21) And there are many more signs that were not recorded by John but which we know of from the other Gospel writers—signs such as cleansing lepers, casting out demons, sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf, even the dead raised.

But Jesus’ signs were not limited to up north in Galilee. He had shown forth His power in Jerusalem. We are told in our text Bethany is in the vicinity of Jerusalem, only about 2 miles (Greek, 15 stadia, vs 18). In Jerusalem Jesus had restored the legs of a man who had been crippled for 38 years (John 5). We saw last week how he had opened the eyes of a man who had never seen, been born blind. This was the talk of the town. Jesus was the talk of the town. There were rising expectations for this one, hopeful expectations.

Yes, this could be the One. After feeding the 5000 the crowd was sure this must be The Prophet. They wanted to make him king by force. After he healed the crippled man some were saying, “When the Christ appears will he do more signs than this man has done?” (7:31) Some were saying, “This is The Prophet,” or “This is the Christ.” (7:40) The talk certainly was talked after he opened the eyes of the blind man.

But for others the expectations were not so hopeful. This could be trouble. Jesus was seen as trouble. He had healed on the Sabbath, both the crippled man, and the blind man. After Jesus said, “I and the Father are one,” some of those who heard picked up stones to stone him (John 10:29-39). Jesus and His disciples left Jerusalem and went across the Jordan where John had earlier been baptizing (John 10:40-41). His disciples expected he would lay low for a while.

What are our expectations as we gather here today? Are we expecting to put in our time and then enjoy a good week without a guilty conscience? What expectations are there for family? Are there health issues, employment issues, or maybe not. All is looking pretty good. There have been so many blessings, children, grand children, maybe you’ve entered a new stage in life, expecting a move and expecting good things. Perhaps you have had a good performance review and all is looking good. Are you anticipating that part of career called retirement? Maybe you are in it already and it has been good.

Are there signs of good expectations in faith life? Your loved one seems finally open to hear. Maybe you are getting beyond that nagging sin

that is always at hand. You have experienced the joy of seeing new people come into the church. Yes, good expectations.

But then what you didn't expect, surely didn't want. Health goes south, family tensions grow along with children. The job is not as satisfying as anticipated. There is no job. Retirement has more stress than expected. That nagging sin resurfaces. People join and then seem to disappear. What's the deal? Rising expectations seem to be deflated.

In our text Jesus does the unexpected, does it more than once. He receives word that Lazarus, His friend, is sick. He gives His disciples the unexpected news that they are going back to Judea. The disciples point out how eager the Jews were to stone him and he's going back? He tells them they need to go back to wake up Lazarus. Wake up Lazarus—that doesn't make any sense! If he's asleep he'll just wake up. No, Jesus points out, 'He's dead, and I'm glad I wasn't there. Now you will believe!' Then we have a stellar moment for the one who will later be known as the Doubter. He says the unexpected, "Let us also go, that we may die with him." (vs 16) So they go, probably go expecting the worst.

They go. Lazarus has been dead for four days. Jesus hears the same statement from both sisters, one at a time. They express unfulfilled expectations, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (vss 21, 32) they had full expectation that Jesus could have healed him, only, if only, he had been there. But he had not! They probably fully expected that He would come as soon as He heard the word, not stay put where He was for two more days. The people who came to comfort also

expressed “what could have been” expectations, “Could not he who opened the eyes of the blind man also have kept this man from dying?” (vs 37)

Jesus had rising, even raising expectations. He says to Martha, “Your brother will rise again.” She answer she knows that, but she wasn’t really expecting it on this day or maybe not in her lifetime, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.” (vs 24) She may not have expected Jesus response, “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in men, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in man shall never die. Do you believe this?” (vs 25, 26) Martha answers, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world.” (vs 27) Evidently she was not expecting what the Christ was about to do.

Obviously Jesus knew what He was going to do. He waited for everyone to get into place before He does it. Mary comes, and those who had been mourning with her trying to offer comfort. Maybe they were not expecting Jesus’ reaction. He is moved by the weeping. He too weeps. The crowd notices, “See how He loved him!” (vs 35)

Now comes the unexpected. “Take away the stone!” (vs 39) Martha who has just expressed those wonderful words of faith takes exception, ‘Whoa, it’s been four days, Lord.’ She wasn’t expecting anything pleasant, no, she expecting the rising forth from the tomb of a horrendous odor. “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God!” (vs 4) We have divine expectations here. Jesus expected to be heard by the

Father, but He speaks a word about being heard so those present will know of His expectations. Then those words, spoken in a loud voice, “Lazarus, come out!” (vs 43) He only says it once. It’s more calling life back to the dead, then the dead to life, calling back that life that had gone to be in the presence of God. It was a sign that could not be missed! It goes viral.

And the Jesus leadership almost goes berserk. ‘What are we going to do? This man is doing all these signs. The Romans will come and it will be all over for us.’ (11:47-48) The death the disciples feared was coming, but it would not be by stones. It would be worse, that of the cross. It should not have been unexpected. Jesus had spoken of it more than once. He had also spoken of resurrection. The disciples evidently had a hard time fitting it with their own expectations of the Christ.

Lazarus’ resurrection certainly exceeded expectations. The rest in the grave of four days for the body of Lazarus had been interrupted after only four days. How much more the resurrection that was to happen on the third day. This resurrection was much greater. The One who laid down His life takes it up again. Lazarus’ body is now back at rest somewhere. The body of our Lord Jesus, the firstborn from the dead is at the right hand of the Father in glory. Sin, the sin of all, all those there at the tomb on that day, all of us gathered here this day, sin of all of all time, has been atoned for, the wages of sin paid in full by Christ’s death. It is finished. Jesus’ resurrection shows the cords of death have been snapped. Because that’s a fact we have rising expectations, today, always.

We have good expectations. As we gather here, it is not a matter of putting in our time, someone throwing a little time and attention God's way to appease him—maybe. No, we can expect He is here to give us good things. He gives us the life giving forgiveness that our Lord Jesus has earned for us. He gives it to us in the words of absolution. He gives it to us in a way we take in with our bodies in the Lord's Supper. He gives us encouragement and direction for living as we hear His word, like right now!

We now, those given new life, leave here as those full of love for Him, for one another, and for all. We do so by walking in His commands, again, not somehow to punch our salvation ticket, but for the good of our neighbor and for God's glory. We serve expecting His promises to be fulfilled that whether our individual expectations for life or met or not, come good or bad, God is working all for our good. We may be pleasantly surprised with good in our life or we may be disappointed when bad arrives, but God is never a disappointment.

Yes, we have rising expectations. One day that day Martha spoke of arrives, the resurrection of the last day, which will be first day of days that never end. We long for that day. We are confident of it because of our Lord's resurrection. Praise be to God for rising expectations. For Jesus sake. Amen