SLIDE #1

There is a story that comes from communist Russia 100 years ago. Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin was a powerful man in the Soviet Union. He was the editor of the national newspaper and a soldier in the Bolshevic Revolution that forced communism on Russia in 1917.

In 1930, Nikolai traveled to the Soviet city Kiev to address an assembly of workers. He spoke about atheism. For over an hour, he hurled insults on God, argued against the Christian faith, and tried to disprove God. By the end of his speech, he thought he had made quite the claim for atheism.

Gazing around the room in triumph, he asked if there were any questions. Deafening silence. Until, one old man walked to the platform; he struggled up the stairs to stand next to Nikolai. The old man raised his arm to the sky and cried out the ancient Christian Easter greeting, “Christ is risen!” En masse, from the faith deep in their bones, the crowd cried out in one voice that shook the walls, “He is risen indeed.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

SLIDE #2

I like to tell that story on Easter. It is a story that reminds us that the Easter story is written in our hearts. The Easter story is deeply embedded in our being. Easter gathers the faithful because we can’t go a year without hearing again the story of Christ’s resurrection that is our grace and hope.

No matter what draws us away during the week, no matter what draws us away from year to year, no matter what claims people make about atheism, the death of the church, the relevancy of faith, no matter what, we gather on Easter morning to be reminded that Christ’s promises are true.

My favorite telling of the Easter story is John’s in His Gospel. I like the Gospel of John best and love Mary Magdalene so that is why I prefer John’s telling. Each of the Gospels tell the story of Easter morning differently. I like to treat each one separately because each Gospel includes the details the Gospel writer thinks are important to his telling of the story.

John tells us that Mary Magdalene had gone to the tomb early in the morning on the first day. She saw that the stone covering the mouth of the grave had been rolled away. John doesn’t tell us that she looked in. Mary saw the stone had been rolled away and she ran to tell Simon Peter and the beloved disciple. She tells them, “They have taken the Lord and we don’t know where they put Him.”

The rest of the details aren’t important to John. John just wants us to know that Mary Magdalene was the one who discovered the empty tomb and she was the one who told the disciples. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote, “Without women preachers, we would have no knowledge of the resurrection.”

Simon Peter and the beloved disciple run to the tomb and see the burial clothes. They leave the tomb, but Mary Magdalene stays. She stood outside the tomb crying. She bent over to look in the tomb to see 2 angels in white seated where Jesus had laid. The angels asked, “Why are you crying?”

“They’ve taken my Lord,” is what she tells them. She turns around and sees Jesus, but she doesn’t recognize that it’s Jesus. He asks her, “Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?” Mary asks if He knows where they have taken her friend. Jesus’ only response is “Mary.” He simply says her name and her eyes are opened. She sees Him and recognizes that He is Jesus.

When Mary Magdalene went to the grave that morning, she did not know the Easter story. The hope of her faith had died when Christ was laid in the tomb. She had gone to the tomb to give Him a proper burial. She carried spices for the burial, along with the weight of immense grief. She had not just lost a friend; she had lost her hope.

Mary grieved the plan of salvation she thought was being revealed through Jesus. Jesus was supposed to summons in the glorious new Jerusalem and reign as the heir of David’s throne. Instead, he was crucified. She had gone to bury her Messianic hope in the tomb next to Jesus.

We can relate to her experience. We prepare for an active healthy life. We prepare for marriage and maybe children and grandchildren. We prepare for trade school, college, or work. We build a house and make it a home. We save for the future and plan for retirement.

Then, life happens. We have an accident and are seriously injured. We don’t get the support we needed. Unemployment knocks on our door and our savings are depleted.

A spouse leaves our side and we are left to raise children on our own. Financial loss forces us to make tough decisions. We receive a devastating diagnosis.

Our hopes are shattered. We grieve our vision of the future. We sit in a pile of ashes that once was our dreams. We feel a mixture of grief and fear. We can’t express our pain, so our souls cry out in anguish. We can’t fathom the thought of hoping and dreaming again.

The Easter story reminds us that we are people of the resurrection and that out of despair comes new life. Easter is grace and grace is the gift of unexpected abundant favor.

Moments of grace come in many forms. Grace is that phone call you receive when you need a friend. Grace is the $20 you find in the pocket of an old coat when you’re not sure how you’re going to make it ‘til next pay day. It is an extension when the deadline is looming and there’s too much work left to do. Grace is someone else remembering what you forgot. It is unexpected flowers or kind words. It is your favorite song on the radio when you’ve had a bad day. It is an overwhelming peace when you should be nervous. It is another chance after many unsuccessful attempts. Grace is a moment that seems like a smile from God.

Grace can come in the form of unanswered prayers too. The chorus of Garth Brooks’ song reminds us:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers   
Remember when you're talkin' to the man upstairs   
That just because he doesn't answer

doesn't mean he don't care   
Some of God's greatest gifts are

unanswered prayers[[2]](#footnote-2)

When has God shown up unexpectedly in your life?

These moments of grace are the surprise that assures us that Christ has risen! On Easter morning, we expect the resurrection, but are surprised by simple moments of grace every day. The resurrection doesn’t surprise us, but grace does.

You can imagine if we’re surprised by God’s grace in our lives, how much more Mary was surprised by Jesus in the garden.

On more than one occasion, Jesus foretold his death. Throughout the narrative of Jesus’ life, especially his final days, the resurrection is foretold as much as His death.

My seminary preaching professor Rev. Dr. Wes Allen suggests that the Gospel of John tells one story of salvation. Without each event, the story is not complete. The last night, the crucifixion, the resurrection…altogether is all a work of God’s grace.[[3]](#footnote-3) They should have expected the grace of God in the empty tomb.

We already know the empty tomb means Jesus has been resurrected. We’ve seen the risen Lord and we’ve heard the Good News. We’ve experienced grace. Now, our challenge is to expect grace in our lives. It is bold. But, as people of faith, we believe in grace and miracles. We believe God is active in the world and in our lives. Whether life is going well or not, expect God to show up in a big way.

***Expect grace.***

1. http://record.net.au/items/he-has-risen [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://www.cowboylyrics.com/lyrics/brooks-garth/unanswered-prayers-5000.html [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect\_date=4/6/2012&tab=4 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)