

**7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter – Acts 1: 6-14; 1 Peter 4: 12-14, 5: 6-11;  
John 17: 1-11 St James Church, Shirley. Eucharist.**

**Sermon: Expect the unexpected**

**Prologue – Expectations**

Yesterday was one of my favourite days in the whole calendar: the FA Cup Final and the Eurovision Song Contest on the same day. Two great spectacles, two great traditions, and two competitions that have one thing in common — they can be gloriously unpredictable.

Over the years both competitions have thrown up shock winners. Sometimes the favourites triumph, but often it's a refereeing decision, a moment of madness, or a flash of genius that changes everything. And Eurovision... well, even with all the tactical voting, every year we still find ourselves astonished at how some of the worst songs and strangest acts end up doing remarkably well. Football and Eurovision both teach us a principle that is surprisingly useful in life: expect the unexpected.

**Post-Ascension**

This principle is also good for the life of faith. Yes, there are deep assurances — God's love, the promise of resurrection, the companionship of the Spirit, the fellowship of the Church. These are solid, dependable, trustworthy.

But deep assurances are not the same as predictability. And life with God is anything but predictable.

Our readings open with a very reasonable question from the disciples:

“Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?”

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You can see their logic. This is Jesus' final resurrection appearance. He has opened their minds to the Scriptures. He has commissioned them to be witnesses. Surely now is the moment when he will restore their nation, fulfil the ancient hopes, bring about the long-awaited Day of the Lord.

But Jesus redirects them. The future will not look like the past. The kingdom will not be restored in the way they expect. And he doesn't give them a timetable or a map or a strategy document, or a to-do list – which I always like to have. Instead, he gives them a promise:

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.”

In other words: *You won't get the plan — you'll get the Spirit..* And the Spirit will take you somewhere you cannot yet imagine.

### **Letting go**

The disciples had to let go of some deeply held things. They had to release their old expectations — the picture they had carried for years of what God's kingdom would look like, how it would arrive, and what part they would play in it. They had to let go of their assumptions, the frameworks they had inherited from their tradition, and the hopes they had nurtured since childhood. None of this was wrong. It was simply too small for what God was about to do.

Letting go is not abandonment. It is not erasing the past or disrespecting what has gone before. The prophets, the promises, the longing for restoration — all of that still mattered. But the Spirit was preparing to widen the horizon. The disciples needed open hands, not clenched fists; space in their hearts, not a tight grip on what had been. Letting go is not loss. It is preparation.

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Letting go is the holy work of making room. It is the quiet courage of opening ourselves to God's next chapter. It is the willingness to trust that the future God is shaping may not look like the future we imagined — and that this is not a threat, but a gift. The disciples were not being asked to forget their story. They were being invited to step into a bigger one.

### **Waiting**

Perhaps this is why there is a gap between Ascension and Pentecost. A time of waiting. A time of gathering. A time of prayer. The disciples return to the upper room — that place of safety, sanctuary, memory, and community — and they pray. They sit with the strangeness of what has happened. They begin to realise that Jesus' resurrection and ascension have turned their expectations upside down. Things are going to be different. And they are going to play a key part.

And when the Holy Spirit finally comes, the unexpected becomes the new normal.

### **The new things the Spirit brings**

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, everything began to change. The Spirit didn't simply continue the old story in a slightly improved form; she opened an entirely new chapter in the life of God's people. The first sign of this was the widening of the community. Those who had always been considered outsiders - the Gentiles, suddenly found themselves welcomed in. Through the Spirit's unmistakable prompting, the early Church discovered that God's embrace was far wider than they had ever imagined.

The Spirit also raised up voices that many in the ancient world would never have expected to hear. Women stepped into leadership and proclamation — from Mary Magdalene, the first

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witness to the resurrection, to Priscilla teaching Apollos, to the daughters of Philip who prophesied. These were not exceptions or footnotes; they were signs that the Spirit gifts whom the Spirit wills, and that the new creation breaks old boundaries.

Another big shift came in how God's presence was understood. No longer was the Temple the single place where heaven and earth met. Instead, the Spirit filled each baptised believer. Every person became a living temple, carrying God's presence into homes, workplaces, marketplaces, and communities. Holiness was no longer tied to a building but in human lives.

And as the Spirit moved, the Church grew into something far larger and more diverse than the disciples could ever have planned, crossing cultures, languages, and borders. It became a global, boundary-breaking community, united ultimately by Jesus and the Spirit.

The Spirit does not simply comfort and emboldening in suffering – and the disciples in the communities St Peter was writing to knew all about suffering, and the need for comfort and emboldening – but the Spirit creates and surprises. And again and again, the Spirit leads God's people into places they never expected to go.

## **Future**

So what does all this mean for us — here, now, in our own lives of faith?

Well, if football and Eurovision teach us to expect the unexpected, the Holy Spirit teaches us to *welcome* it. Because the Spirit is always opening up new things: new ways of seeing, new ways of loving, new ways of being a Church. Sometimes the Spirit reveals a new facet of God's character we've never noticed before. Sometimes the Spirit nudges us into a new calling, a new

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responsibility, and a new act of courage. And sometimes the Spirit asks us to let go of something- a habit, a fear, an assumption, so that something new can grow in its place. This can feel unsettling and it should. The unexpected is rarely comfortable. But it can also be exciting, because it is the sign that God is not finished with us yet. The Spirit is still moving, still creating, and still surprising.

So as we look to our own future — as individuals, as a parish, as disciples — let's be ready. Ready to notice, ready to trust, ready to follow.

Because when the Holy Spirit is at work, expect the unexpected - and expect it to be good. Amen

***Rev'd Richard Haynes 7<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter 17 May 2026***