

Easter Sunday; April 17, 2022

He Is Not Here! He Has Risen!

(Series: "The Gospel According to Peter")

(Message Seven)

(Mark 16:1-8)

Scripture:

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?"

⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

⁶"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Message:

Done as a dramatic reading:

"Peter, I'm so sorry! I should have told you earlier. But we were so scared. We had taken our oils and spices and headed to the tomb just as the sun was coming up. We just wanted to honor Jesus...

Salome hadn't stopped crying since Friday. But as we walked out the city gate she said, 'This is foolish. We won't be able to anoint his body!'

I said, 'Who's going to stop us. Nobody cares about a criminal's body!'

She said, 'That's not it. You saw the stone. It's huge. Who will roll it away?'

Her question made me mad. I've been so mad at the world, our leaders, the Romans, and even God. I said, 'I'll do it!'

But when we got there, the stone was already rolled back! It was already moved! We knew something was wrong; that's when we got scared! We walked close together, slowly and quietly...and looked inside.

Peter, remember when you told me about seeing Moses and Elijah with Jesus on the mountain, and Jesus was so bright he blinded you? I think I know what you meant!

Peter! There was a man I never saw before inside the tomb, dressed in radiant white. But it wasn't Jesus! Jesus wasn't there! But he knew my name!

He said, *'I know you're looking for Jesus. He's not here! He has risen.'*

He pointed to the stone ledge inside the tomb and said, *'See, he's not here. This was the place where they laid him.'*

We all just stared at the bare ledge and started to shake. It was terrifying! Fear, panic and confusion - my body couldn't take it! I could hardly believe it.

Peter, are you listening? Do you understand? It was so frightening! Peter, it felt like we were standing as close to God as Moses did, even closer! I couldn't even breathe; and then, we just ran as fast as we could...we were so afraid..."

The Easter message is the hardest message of the year to prepare...

Attendance is usually up; the number of hymns and choirs in the service is up, even the spring flowers are up...and so are people's expectations. And the challenge is compounded by our text for this morning – **Mark 16**

All four Gospel writers – Mathew, Mark, Luke, John – tell the story of **Jesus**: his endless compassion, his vivid teaching, and his surprisingly frequent conflicts.

As we read or listen to their gospels, we realize they're not merely **teaching** us, they are making an **announcement**: God is here. God longs to take up residence with us. God wants us to participate in what he is doing.

Each writer takes great care to make sure we understand that this *announcement* has to do with *us*. No one is excluded; everyone is included. If you've ever been treated poorly or as insignificant because you're a woman, a foreigner, a different color, a child, elderly, handicapped, poor, a criminal, a failure, you can find yourself in this story. You are named. You are loved. You can be saved. You are included in God's story as lived out by Jesus.

The story climaxes when one influential group God said were included in His story, decide they don't want God in their story, so they arrest him, put him on trial, and kill him. (The manure parable now takes on meaning! cf. message four of this series: *The Slow Work of God.*)

This story of Jesus' passion, of his suffering and crucifixion, is the most compelling and powerful story in the world; even people who don't believe the story know the story. That is what makes it so hard to preach on Easter.

There is an incredible amount of evil and suffering in our world. We can turn on our television today and observe one country carpet bombing another country killing their women and children.

If we're going to have a faith that is **worth** having, believe in a God who can make a difference, it must help us deal with the **worst** that can happen.

Jesus experienced the worst on the **cross**. The cross of Jesus is not an unfortunate episode we should try to sweep under the rug, i.e., an embarrassing skeleton in the closet of the Gospel. No one fails to be moved or encouraged by it. If Jesus could enter this world and face this extreme adversity, then we can also find hope and meaning.

This **end**, Jesus' death on a cross, is not the end but the **climax** of history because of Jesus' **resurrection**. The Jesus who was killed by the people who didn't want God in their lives is now raised by God to be their God, whether they want him or not.

Christ is risen! We celebrate that resurrection today, on Easter Sunday, and every Sunday: one Easter and fifty-one mini-Easters every year.

RESURRECTION

All four Gospel writers tell the resurrection story from their own perspective. They all provide a **happy** ending to a terrible experience – all except **Mark**.

Matthew, Luke, and John provide stories of the risen Christ confirming his resurrected presence with face-to-face appearances to his disciples who celebrate! They walk the disciples through their hesitations and bewilderments to believe this extraordinary event; they provide confirmations that transform their **doubts** into **belief**, their sorrow into rejoicing, and their running and hiding from hostility to standing firm in the center of intense persecution.

Not Mark. Mark never shows us Jesus alive, never shows us the disciples believing, never shows us anyone rejoicing, never shows us anyone obeying. His resurrection story is the briefest – just eight verses.

Mark just tells us about three women coming to tend the corpse of Jesus. He shows us an empty tomb and an empty shelf. An angelic looking young man tells the women there is **no body** to embalm because "*Jesus is not here, he is risen.*" He commands them to **tell others**.

Then, we have the three women eager to care for Jesus disobeying the angel's command. They say **nothing to nobody** (the Greeks loved double negatives ☺).

So Mark's last words are, if you can believe this, "*because they were **afraid***" (literally, scared to death). (The remaining verses of Mark in some Bibles are not found in the earliest manuscripts.)

The three women are at the tomb because they owed Jesus their gratitude, because they were grieved by this death, and because they remained loyal to his memory.

But their response to the *announcement* that Jesus was alive was disobedience. They were commanded to pass along the angel's message, but instead of obeying, they said nothing to anyone (not even the disciples!). They had just received supernatural testimony that Jesus, crucified, dead and buried, was alive; instead of worshipping and celebrating, they were scared into silence.

Why would anyone who was just told the terrific news that their Rabbi was not dead but alive not tell anyone? But they didn't.

The angel says that if the women want to "see" Jesus they should go to Galilee. While **Jerusalem** is the center of Judaism, **Galilee** is the crossroads of the world. Numerous trade routes brought righteous Jews, Hellenistic Jews, Samaritans, active and retired Roman soldiers, pagan Greeks, and people of all nations together in Galilee (cf. map).

By going (back) to Galilee, Jesus makes it clear that his followers will include Jews and Gentiles; that is, everyone will be welcome in his kingdom.

Jesus' ministry **started** in Galilee. His mission now **continues** there with a broader focus; like the disciples, we're invited to join Jesus on his mission to the world.

The Good News of Easter is that Jesus is alive and he went on ahead of them. Jesus leads us into our *Galilees*; we are to go to where he is. Following Jesus always involves a journey; we follow Jesus into Galilee, into His world.

Based only on what the other writers tell us, we know that these women eventually believed, obeyed and passed along the message. But initially, they did not. Mark takes great pain to let us know this fact.

Mark's Gospel does not have a typical ending. He leaves his story dangling – an *Unfinished Gospel*, like Franz Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*. Is this any way to end a biography? A Bible story? A Good News announcement? Mark leaves the resurrection story **open ended**.

It begs for a proper ending (and some have apparently tried). Is this what you want to hear from your pastor on Easter morning?

REFORMATION

Mark is telling us we have now come to the hard part. We need to provide the proper ending – that Mark suggests has not yet been written. It will not be easy for Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, Salome, the **disciples** - or for you or me – or for any **follower** of Jesus.

Up until now, following Jesus has been relatively easy. They watched Jesus heal; they listened to him teach; they had followed him to Jerusalem.

It had hard to watch Jesus suffer and die on Friday, hard to go to the tomb on Sunday morning. But it will get much harder.

We take our children to Sunday school, attend church regularly, decide to live a Christ-attentive life, love a neighbor (or church or family member) you don't like... None of this is easy, but it's a lot easier than what often lies ahead.

Jesus traveled a road most people are not eager to walk: ***Come, follow me.*** *Go where I go. Walk in my footsteps.*

Jesus said the road to real joy and Christlikeness is downward mobility, letting go of this life, taking up a cross, and following him – the role of a humble servant, a suffering servant. In raising Jesus from the dead, God is saying, “*This is the kind of life I **ble**ss, the kind that **honor**s me, the kind that knows suffering and sacrifice, the kind that has eternal significance.*”

Life has now suddenly and radically changed for the followers of Jesus. Going forward is not just more of the same, of what they experienced in the past. Going forward will be quite different. Jesus is alive. Jesus has conquered death! Nothing they had done could account for this. They have now been commanded to take up Jesus' mission and see it to completion.

That is, they are not in charge; we are not in charge; they are not in control; we are not in control. Under his lordship, everything is different. They are no longer consumers getting from Jesus what they want; we are not consumers getting from Jesus what we want. We are not simply tourists visiting holy places with Jesus as our tour guide; we are witnesses to the resurrection!

And...his resurrection changes **everything**.

The resurrection is the dividing point between a **consumer** focused religion and the precious **life-transforming** Gospel, between an addendum to our life to the essence and purpose of our life.

This one event separates everyone into two groups: people who want God to give them what they want, and people who embrace what God wants to give

them. No longer are we just doing something for God (i.e., preparing his body); we are open to God doing something in us (coming alive in us). We are not drawn by need or curiosity to God; God is now drawn by his compassion and love to us.

This event separates the people who want to have a bit of meaning in their life by running (**doing**) a few **errands** for God from the people who are willing to let **God work** out his salvation in and through them.

This event separates the people who come to church to tell God what he should do to improve their life from the people who come to church to let God tell them how to live in love and faith and hope – and then actually do it.

There's nothing wrong with wanting something from God; there's nothing wrong with wanting to do something for God; there is nothing wrong with telling God what is on our mind.

But there comes a time when we must realize God is for us, that he is alive in our life and world, that he is the one we must believe, obey, worship, and adore.

This is what Eugene Peterson calls the resurrection *fulcrum*; it is the tipping point between being **focused** on **ourselves** and being focused on the **God** who is **focused** on **us**.

Now that the preliminaries are over; the play begins. The race starts. The mission ensues. Eternal life is launched. Are you ready for this? Is it going to be yes or no?

RESULTS

That's why it is hard to prepare an Easter sermon. What can a pastor say?

It is fairly easy to teach you, to explain what Jesus said and did. It is fairly easy to tell you what you do wrong, to point out your sins. (I look in a mirror every morning, so I know.) It is fairly easy to call us to action, to give advice, to motivate you to good works.

But on Easter, none of that seems very important. What is important is that Jesus is alive; that he **rose** from the dead – and that he is **still alive**, and that everything is now different. That means that neither you nor I are in charge, and God is. That means you aren't coming to God; God is coming to you. That means you are not needed anymore to take care of a **dead** Jesus, but that a fully alive Jesus is calling forth, literally, commanding, a **new life** in you.

We don't **expect** that. The women didn't; disciples didn't. No one ever expects that. The resurrection demands so much more from us.

We do well to be **afraid**. It means the **end** of our current way of life, where we know where we stand, where we have learned to feel *comfortable*, where we seem to have some control.

It means the **beginning** of a new way of life, where we don't know what will happen, where we find ourselves in places and situations we have **never been** before, and where we understand we have no control.

The moment Mary Magdalene, the other Mary, and Salome realized Jesus was alive and their little religious jobs that gave their day meaning and identity weren't needed anymore, they were **afraid**. They intuitively understood their life was going to **change dramatically!**

They were on the edge of the abyss of faith and grace, of hope and obedience. They were ready to live. And yet, they were not ready.

How long did they fearfully hold back? Hesitate? Waver? A few minutes? A few hours? Mark doesn't tell us. We know they didn't hold back forever. Before the day was over, the other Gospel writers tell us they did believe. And...they did obey. And they, and the world were never the same again.

Mark's Gospel doesn't have a typical conclusion. Mark, unlike the other gospels, leaves the resurrection story **open ended**, yet to be written. Biblical scholars and archeologists have searched for a preserved conclusion they thought might have been lost. Meanwhile, some writers inserted conclusions from other Gospels.

But the best Biblical research indicates Mark **purposely** ended his gospel this way. In doing so, Mark leaves us with a sense of **wondering** what is coming next. In fact, Mark's open ending dramatically catches the **theme** of the **Easter** story; the end of the world-saving Gospel includes us!

Will you accept his **invitation** and follow him to **Galilee**? Will you take up his cross and follow in his footsteps? Will you tell the broken community (church) the Good News of the resurrection? Will you, in everything you do, proclaim the Good News of the resurrection to a world hopelessly addicted to brokenness? Will you embody the resurrection life in a culture of death?

Will you, now knowing what it means, drink the **cup** that Jesus **drank**? Will you follow him? Meet Him at the crossroads of the world? (Of the remaining eleven disciples, ten died horrific deaths and one was banished.)

Easter is the story that never ends, because Jesus continues to invite us and others to be part of the story of ultimate victory he continues to write through our lives.

Don't let the sun go down today without believing and obeying. Don't let the sun go down on this Easter Sunday without **embracing** the life that comes only when Christ is fully living in you.

Prayer:

Father, we celebrate the resurrection of your Son and our Savior Jesus Christ. We thank you that he sits at your right hand and is alive in each of us. Father, we are your temple; we are your body; we are your witnesses. If every wall should crumble and every church decay, we are you habitation!

Ours are the eyes with which you look out with compassion in the world. Ours are the hands and feet active in fulfilling your mission. Ours is the voice that testifies to your Gospel. And now, take us outside, Lord Jesus – outside holiness, outside to where soldiers curse and nations clash, out to the crossroads of this world, so your suffering, death, and resurrection will continue to bring you glory!

We ask this in the name of the risen Christ, Amen

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