

When Words Fail
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher
April 4, 2021
Mark 16:1–8

Such familiar words that have a beauty all its own. A reading from Mark Chapter 16:1–8:

Mark 16:1-8

16When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

The Word of God. Thanks be to God

During the past year in COVID time Gregg and I have watched far more television than we care to admit. Over the past couple of weeks, we have been transfixed on the real time views of the volcano continues to erupt in Iceland. First, thousands of earthquakes made it inevitable that there would be a volcanic eruption somewhere! Will it block the road to the major airport will the eruption happen and cause Reykjavik to evacuate? About two weeks ago it happened. And it turned out to be the best-case scenario. In a deserted valley about a 3-hour hike from the nearest road, molten lava started shooting forth from the core of the earth. No one hurt, no property damage and thousands of people are coming to see this phenomenon from nature. They are witnessing lava springing up from 17 miles in the core of the earth. It is a sight to behold as a brand-new topography is being created on our planet before our very eyes! One enthusiastic hiker who came to the sight and posted a video for all of us armchair travelers to see exclaimed, "I have never seen anything like this, the beauty the power, I am without words. Something is happening here!"

Today we stand before the empty tomb and we too say we are without words. Indeed, something remarkable happened at the gravesite.

In Mark we read that the women found a man dressed in white who instructs them to go and tell the disciples what they have seen, but they are so struck with amazement the words fail them. According to Mark, they are silent. It is too powerful for words. It is in the lack of words that we begin to appreciate that something has happened here.

Let us go back to the events that leads us to this empty tomb. On Friday, there is horror and death. What the Romans do to Jesus is an act of brutality and terrorism. As they nail Jesus on the cross with sign that derisively says ‘King of the Jews!’ They loudly proclaim to the Jews, do not presume to claim your kingdom here. If you do, we will silence you! your words will fail. We, the Romans, are the ones who hold this kingdom in place. We are the victors in this geo political world.

That Friday, humans seek to silence our God. From the Friday perspective, it looks as if Jesus complies as he gives a loud cry then breathed his last breath. And all is silent.

The silence continues through Friday night and into Saturday. Nothing happens when Jesus’ body is laid in the tomb. Night falls on Saturday still no words, only silence.

We pass through the empty void until Easter morning where the women are overwhelmed with what they see. God speaks and now it is the women whose words fail them. In the face of horror, death, hatred and power, love is the victor. It is this day that our words fail. God speaks once and for all!

Eventually, word gets out and mark this day, Easter Sunday affirming the event of the Resurrection. We gather and tune in, because Jesus, God’s son, who was dead, is now alive.

Many remarkable things happened as a result of that day when the stone was rolled away. The lives of Jesus’ followers were transformed. It is not only that they spoke in different ways or that they proclaimed what they witnessed, but also their world view was altered. The resurrection transformed them into bearers of the Good News. They carried the message, the story of the resurrection

of Jesus to the ends of the earth even if it meant imprisonment, torture or death.

There is no chance whatsoever that these disciples of Jesus, were consciously deluding those to whom they told their message. There is also no chance that they were religious charlatans. No one who consciously deceives another carries his or her falsehood to torture and death. No one who deludes other people faces wild beasts for the sake of a lie. Those who witnessed the Resurrection were utterly convinced, immovably convinced, of the truth of what they saw. Their lives were dramatically changed in the face of the empty tomb, in ways that words cannot begin to express.

In too many ways to tell, the course of human history has been affected by the first Easter. Because of what happened, countless lives have taken different paths. As the story is told it points us back to what those women experienced that first morning and what they were too afraid to speak about. It points to the event where words failed them at that time.

What then is this remarkable event which has proven to be a watershed of human history? When we are putting the meaning of Easter together in our own lives, what do we find? Many words and phrases have been used to describe what happened that day: Jesus rose from the dead, victorious, broke the bonds of death, destroyed the shackles of sin, loosed the gates of hell, broke every chain and encumbrance, and lives forever more, the battles over and the victory's won, alleluia!

Or to quote Aslan, the Christ figure lion, in C.S. Lewis' *The Lion the Witch the Wardrobe*, "Death has been reversed."

Even for us people of the Word, our oral language fails us when we consider the impact of this event. There is a scene from John Mansfield's drama, "The trial of Jesus" a centurion who stood beneath the cross returns to give Pilate his report. Pilate's wife asks the centurion, "Do you think he is dead?" The Centurion replies, "No, lady I don't." "Well then where is he?" "Let loose in the world lady, where no one can stop his truth."¹

That is where Jesus is, "let loose in the world." It happened that first Easter, where "death is reversed" and Christ lives again.

Easter is not just to celebrate a past event. You and I mark this day because we want the resurrection to be real for us today. We want to feel the wonder and amazement when words are not adequate because something significant has happened to us that radically changes our lives. We are not interested in a tale in a land far away and in a time long ago. We seek the Risen Christ today to meet us in our lives.

Year after year, we hear the story and listen to the familiar words. We hear the good news proclaimed with joy. We sing the glad hymns of the day. Year after year we hear the offer of newness of life, the offer of resurrection from all kinds of death which are part of our life experiences. And year after year many of our lives remains the same. We are unchanged living a life of uncertainty, a life threatened by meaninglessness, a life haunted by our own inevitable end in death. Somehow, the Resurrection does not have the same life altering effect on us as it did for those witness of long ago.

¹ John Mansfield *The trial of Jesus*

Sometimes we feel that we are losing ground. What is happening as our churches shrink and our culture seems to be smothering our faith? Why are the things that we have taken for granted, liberty and justice for all is not the same for everyone? Christian faith cannot be contained or legislated. It is not tied to a government or to the political arena. John Meacham in an article in Newsweek entitled the decline of Christianity wrote, “The Jesus of the gospels resolutely refuses to use the means of this world to further his ends.”² As Jesus tells Pilate “My kingdom is not of this world.” What has happened here this day transcends government policy and human power.

And yet, why is it that all these Easter services do not seem to work? Why is it that all the words of resurrection and new life seem weak and ineffective? Why is it that the great Easter hymns seem as empty words and melodies on the Monday following this glorious day? How can we take a short detour from our lives and enter this place and then return so quickly without much change in the way we do things?

There is only one tomb from which Jesus Christ does not escape. On this day or any day of the year, there is only one set of shackles that can hold Christ in defeat, and that is the tomb, and the stubborn grip of the prideful human heart. The human heart can keep Jesus securely dead.

Out of our pride, and our human need to maintain the delusion that we have power and control, we subdue and render powerless the one who truly has the power. Out of our fear of what God might possibly do in our lives if we open the door to our hearts, we keep the one who brings such dangerous newness, safely trapped and

² *Newsweek* April 13, 2009 p.38.

unable to work miracles in us. Out of our idolatry of raising up the things we do and accomplish as all-important, we build a grave from which Jesus will not burst forth in victory.

It is not that Jesus the Son of the living God, cannot break free from these shackles in which we bind him. Nor is it that he is powerless to overwhelm our pride and cast out our fear and smash our idolatry. He who sits at the right hand of God certainly can break the little constraints we place upon him. He could, if he chose, bend our will to his control, but he does not. Christ desires for us to be followers who listen, learn and love and change for him. Although he is able to open the cold tomb of our heart, we are the ones who have the key which allows Jesus to become alive within us.

For many who keep Christ safely imprisoned in the bondage of pride, fear, or sheer stubbornness, Easter's resurrection is a story, not a present reality. The words of Easter fail, not because of the wonder of it, but because the words fall on hearts that are not open to hear and to be changed. For those of us who refuse to release him and have the Risen Christ be part of our lives, the Easter miracle is simply a wish, a dream, a nice thought, not a driving force in our lives.

Jesus jumped up high out of his grave of stone; yet we keep him dead in our hearts of stone. He waited three days to rise from death to life; he waits now to rise up within us.

So, this day, we have the opportunity for each of us to roll away the stone from our hearts. We can release the captive Jesus who we have imprisoned and let him free to bring newness in our lives with the power to transform us. We can ask Jesus to give us a foundation for life in place of meaninglessness, to give us faith in

place of fear, and to give us hope in the face of death. As our hearts are opened, Christ becomes the pulse and the core of our being. Our world view is altered. As the hymns, the glad tidings, the joyous words all fade, this newness and this freedom from fear and hopelessness remains, for today, tomorrow, and forever.

This Easter day can be for you the real resurrection. Today, April 4, 2021 in the midst of a pandemic, in the middle of social unrest, and wherever you are listening, can be a day which you can remember and refer by saying “See this place where he lay, where I kept him captive in my stony heart. He is not here but has risen to rule my life. Now I have faith, when once I believe that nothing could change how I felt. Now I have hope, where once I found only fear and discouragement. Now I know that love wins this day and every day. Once I could only see the tunnel of my own needs and wants. Today, this day, Christ has been released and I have truly found Easter.”

Truly this is a day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad.
Alleluia!