

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Bart Roush
March 31, 2024 – Easter Sunday
Mark 16:1–8

Let us pray for inspiration from and an awareness of God’s Spirit.

O God of all our days, we come this morning with eager anticipation. We seek to know you, to see you, to touch you. Open our hearts, that we might experience you anew. Open our lives, that we may be faithful witnesses to your resurrection.

May we, with shouts of joy, proclaim your steadfast, liberating love to all people, everywhere. In Jesus’s name. Amen.

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.

It is a refrain that has been heard the world over.

Christ is Risen! *Christ is risen indeed!* Alleluia!

Today it has been uttered in great cathedrals, in parks, on mountain tops, in store-front churches, in homes, and sanctuaries like ours. It has been ushered in by trumpets and fanfare, by timpani, by organ, and guitars and drums. It has been shouted by the young and old alike. With hope and expectation, with doubts or unwavering faith, and with great joy people have declared the mystery of our faith and the triumph of God over death.

And yet, in many of those places the familiar refrain may not be as close to the original account as it could be. The gospel of Mark brings us a different story. Instead of a proclamation of the risen Christ, we get the women leaving the empty tomb in terror and amazement, too afraid to say a word to anyone.

In Mark's telling of the resurrection, there are no shouts of "Christ is risen!" Instead, there is fear and silence. In Mark's account of the resurrection – the resurrected Jesus doesn't appear at all. When the women make it to the tomb, they are greeted by a young man dressed in a white robe who tells them that Jesus has been raised and that he has gone on to Galilee just as he said he would. The women leave and say nothing, this is the end of the Gospel of Mark.

When I was in college, I studied directing for the theatre. My directing professor would often say to his students that when it came to directing a play, you need to make sure that you had a good beginning and a good ending. If you had those, he said, a good beginning and a good ending, the audience would forgive most of what came in the middle.

A lot of people didn't think the ending to the gospel of Mark, with the women leaving terrified and silent was a good ending. It was so bad in fact, that at some point in Christian history, others wrote more than was originally there to try and fix the ending. And it's easy to see why.

Mark starts out in a similar fashion as the other gospel accounts of Easter Sunday do. It is early morning, before dawn, the women have set off to anoint the body of Jesus. When they get there, the stone is already rolled away, they are told of Jesus resurrection, and they are told to go and tell and then the ending is botched. Instead of going to tell, the women leave terrified and silent. Of course, people wanted to change the ending – that's no way to end the gospel – the Good News of a God that defeats death with a resurrected Jesus. So later writers added more to the story, to make it have a happier ending, one with a resurrected Jesus and the good news being shared. But all the earliest manuscripts that scholars have of the gospel of Mark have the ending as I read it to you earlier with the women leaving silent and terrified. This means that it is most likely where and how Mark intended to finish the gospel. With utter failure and fear, and no resurrected Jesus to encounter the disciples to dispel their fear and doubt and set them on a new path.

It's easy to sympathize with those who came after and read this ending and decided that they needed to say more, that the story couldn't possibly end there in that way. So, we have what has become to be known as the "shorter ending," with fear silence, and we have what is known as the "longer ending" which ties everything up in a much cleaner and happier manner and is like the other gospels.

And yet, when there is so much to be fearful of in the world, when things seem to be upside down, – I kind of understand the women more. I understand the need to be silent, to be a little scared in the face of the unknown. I understand the emptiness of the tomb a little more.

The Greek sentence that says, “for they were afraid,” actually ends with the word, “for.” The word is *gar*. So that a literal translation of the sentence is, “they were very afraid for...”

In the Greek, the phrase ends with, in fact if we believe this is the original ending, the entire gospel ends with a part of speech, a particle, that normally opens up the next thing. Normally there is something that follows this word. But in this sentence, after the word, “for,” there is nothing there. Just emptiness. It’s a suspenseful ending. It’s open.

We’ve heard through the last few days of things opening. Heavens opening, curtain opening, tomb opening, and the gospel opens, open to the world and it isn’t wrapped up neatly.

I think the story in the Gospel of Mark is told this way because it conveys meaning. There is meaning in emptiness. God works in the emptiness and the silence. We celebrate today where God has emptied Godself into the world. God works in the emptiness again and again.

As one writerⁱ notes, God told Noah to build the empty ark, God filled the empty sky with a rainbow declaring a promise and a hope.

God worked with Moses empty mouth, giving him a staff and Aaron for help, emptying the Red Sea so the people could be free, and God filled Miriam’s mouth with a song.

God emptied Godself into a humble servant Mary and she sang of how the child would empty the thrones of power, to empty injustice.

Jesus would preach into the empty places in people’s hearts and lives.

He would heal, emptying himself in love.

He would pray in the silence and emptiness of the Garden of Gethsemane.

And then he would empty himself on the cross.

And then the women would come to the empty tomb, their mouths hung open empty of words and astonishment.

God is a god who works in the emptiness. Faith in the resurrected Jesus points us to something bigger than ourselves and helps us push through the emptiness and uncertainty. The resurrection, the risen Christ reminds us that through all the muck and struggle, and pain, that resurrection is the last word. That God gets the final say.

You will hear many Christians focus on the events of this past week, with a strong emphasis on the crucifixion. God loves us so much that God was willing to die for us. And while that may be true, the gospel tells us that God loves us so much that Jesus is risen! Death is not the last word, nor the focus of the love of God, rather it is life. It is the boundary breaking, radical and scandalous gospel that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus, nothing. Not our ability to follow, not our income, our profession, our parenting skill (or lack thereof), our gender, our orientation, our marital status, our race, none of those things that we so readily use to separate and delineate. Nothing can separate us from the all-encompassing, prodigal, extravagant love of God in Jesus, not even death. This is the good news, that goodness is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.

The Gospel of Mark is almost always straight to the point, with little embellishment. Like the ending, much of Mark is abrupt. And maybe we should realize that from the very first verse. As one preacher reminds us, Mark, “doesn’t give us the long genealogy of Matthew; the tender story of shepherds, angels, and a mother and her newborn together in a stable as in Luke; or the theologically soaring and totally wonderful hymn to the Word made flesh of John. Rather, Mark says simply, even pointedly,

‘The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.’”ⁱⁱ

So much for a good beginning and a good ending in this story. It is just to the point. Some have wondered if that first sentence isn’t a title to the Gospel rather than an opening line. But, here again, Mark says so much in so little. Mark says right from the start, this is the “beginning” of the Good News. Maybe that should have been our clue that we would get an incomplete ending. This is only the beginning of the story. The story isn’t over.

“The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn’t over at the empty tomb. *It’s only just getting started.* Resurrection isn’t a conclusion, it’s an invitation. And Jesus’ triumph over death, sin, and hate isn’t what Mark’s Gospel is all about. Rather, Mark’s Gospel is all about setting us up to live resurrection lives and continue the story of God’s redemption of the world.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The story doesn’t end with Jesus’ resurrection, but it continues all the way until now with us. The story isn’t over, it isn’t complete.

The story is only the beginning, and we are called to take our part. Jesus still has work to do in the world. The work of resurrection and reconciliation isn’t over. There is still pain and distress in the world. There is injustice and oppression. There is violence and death. There is emptiness, fear, and uncertainty.

But the story isn’t over yet. God isn’t done yet. It’s only the beginning of the Good News. And this story invites us to participate. This story of resurrection invites us to follow where Jesus goes, even when we can’t see him. Even when he is far ahead of us and on to the next thing. It’s only the beginning and we are invited to continue the work, we are invited to tell the good news, we are invited to proclaim release to the captive, to fight injustice, to work for the good of all.

This is the beginning of the good news. This story doesn't end but continues. Resurrection continues. This is not the end, this is the beginning.

Christ is Risen. *Christ is risen indeed.* Alleluia!

Amen!

ⁱ Adapted from Katy Stenta, <https://katyandtheword.com/2020/03/26/my-god-is-the-god-of-emptiness/>

ⁱⁱ David Lose, <https://www.davidlose.net/2015/03/easter-b-only-the-beginning/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid