

# What Does It Mean?

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher  
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio  
April 1, 2018—Easter

- Mark 16:1-18 <sup>1</sup> When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup> And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup> They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” <sup>4</sup> When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup> As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup> But 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. <sup>7</sup> But 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.” <sup>8</sup> So 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. (New Revised Standard Version translation)
- 1 Peter 1:3-9 <sup>3-5</sup> What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we’ve been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven – and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you’ll have it all – life healed and whole. <sup>6-7</sup> I know how great this makes you feel, even though you have to put up with every kind of aggravation in the meantime. Pure gold put in the fire comes out of it *proved* pure; genuine faith put through this suffering comes out *proved* genuine. When Jesus wraps this all up, it’s your faith, not your gold, that God will have on display as evidence of his victory. <sup>8-9</sup> You never saw him, yet you love him. You still don’t see him, yet you trust him – with laughter and singing. Because you kept on believing, you’ll get what you’re looking forward to: total salvation. (“The Message” translation)
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: In our lives we carry on the witness of the women who discovered the Empty Tomb.

Imagine the distance between here and San Francisco – more than 2,000 miles. Now, imagine sailing that far out from South America’s west coast of Chile. If you did, you might come across a 7-mile by 14-mile volcanic outcropping in the middle of an expanse of open ocean. You have found Easter Island. Easter Island was inhabited by Polynesian peoples sometime around the fourth or fifth century. They had sailed from islands located about 2,500 miles farther west. In the year 1722 some Dutch sailors came upon this not-yet-a-dot-on-the-map island, and since that happened on Easter, they gave it the name Easter Island.

Why Easter Island is famous, of course, is because of the statues. You’ve seen them: large busts featuring elongated stone heads carved from the island’s gray volcanic rock. Nine-hundred statues can be found all over the island. The average statue is thirteen feet high and weighs about as much as thirty grand pianos, with the largest statue being nearly forty feet high. These eye-less statues stare silently over the hillsides out across the vast waters.

What is their significance? How were they moved to various parts of the island and set in place? Why were they carved? What do they mean? We don’t know.

That’s the story of Easter Island. When it comes to its story we don’t know what it means.

What about the Bible’s story of Easter? What does it mean?

The Bible contains four accounts of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Those accounts – called gospels – were written by different people. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were in different places when they wrote and probably didn’t know each other. They had in common *some* of their sources for the stories and

the words of Jesus. But each gospel writer had other sources unique to him. That's why a certain story might appear in one or two gospels but not the others.

The Easter story is one that appears in all four gospels. That alone tells us how important it was. Even the Christmas story doesn't appear in all four gospels – did you know that? The birth of Jesus is described only in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But the Easter story is in all four of them. Having said that, however, each gospel's Easter story has unique features; they're not all exactly the same.

Today we heard the version from the Gospel of Mark. He agrees with the other gospels that the Easter story begins on a Sunday morning, since it says it was "the first day of the week." A woman or several women were heading to the tomb of Jesus. Why? To see if he had been raised from the dead? No. Even though Jesus had predicted his death and resurrection, his followers were so overcome with grief that they weren't able to recall that he had prophesied that he would be raised from death to life.

The reason the women headed to the tomb that morning was that it was their first chance to complete burial tasks that they hadn't finished on Friday. Remember, Jesus was buried in haste in order to comply with the Jewish practice of burial before sunset on the day of death. Jesus died on a Friday, and the observance of the Jewish Sabbath began at sundown that day. Observing the Sabbath meant refraining from all work, including burial preparations. Apparently there hadn't been enough time to properly cleanse and anoint his body.

So the Sabbath observance began at sundown on Friday, and ended at sundown on Saturday, at which point the women could have completed the burial preparation tasks. But let's face it: then, like today, who would want to go to the cemetery after dark? No one. That's why the women were heading to the tomb at first light early on Sunday morning. They fully expected to remove the shroud from his body and use the waters and oils they were carrying.

What did it mean when the women saw that the stone that sealed the tomb had already been rolled aside? For one thing, it was a relief. Opening the tomb was a detail they hadn't made plans for, so that solved a problem. But on further thought... who *would* have opened the tomb? Had some other women also set out on this task? Had some of the disciples returned to grieve? Might Roman soldiers have been up to something? Had grave robbers broken in only to be disappointed in finding no treasures with the corpse?

Hesitantly, the women entered the tomb. Instead of an enshrouded body lying in one of the tomb's rock niches, they saw a white-robed young man sitting there as if he were waiting for them. What did that angelic being's presence mean? Had he opened the tomb? Removed the body?

To the women – and to all posterity – that angelic figure delivered the message of Easter: "He who was crucified has been raised." And by the way, note that in all four gospels that message was delivered for the first time in all the world... *to women*.

Now here's where Mark's gospel catches us off-guard. In the other gospels, the resurrected Jesus makes an appearance, either there with the women or later to the apostles and their companions. But not in Mark's gospel. Not only that, but the women ran away. Despite being directed by the angel to tell Peter and the other disciples that they *will* see Jesus when they travel to the Galilee region as Jesus had previously instructed them, Mark's gospel tells us nothing about it. Mark doesn't describe a rendezvous between the disciples and the Risen Christ. He doesn't even confirm that the women spoke to the disciples as the angel had directed. Instead, Mark's gospel says only that they "fled from the tomb" and "said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."<sup>1</sup>

To be frank, rather than feeling like a story of triumph, the Easter story as presented by Mark's gospel can feel a little disappointing. Yes, we are told that Jesus rose from death to life, but the rest in Mark's version seems to be a tale of failure. The women failed to tell the disciples. Jesus didn't make an appearance. Believe it or not, across the centuries there were some attempts to add to the end of Mark's gospel to soften what seems to be an abrupt and disappointing account of the Resurrection. Many Bibles include those so-called "alternate endings" to Mark's gospel. But Bible scholars are confident that the oldest, that is, the earliest, and thus least messed-around-with versions of Mark's gospel end abruptly and leave us feeling incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 16:8 New Revised Standard Version

So what does that mean for us?

From the perspective of Mark's gospel it means that we are drawn into the story. We become *part* of the story because we have a role to carry out in God's plan to spread the good news of God's love revealed in Jesus Christ. Although Mark's gospel says that the women "said nothing to anyone," obviously that couldn't have been the case *forever*. Think about it – Mark, for one, knew enough to be able to write about the resurrection. The women who made that unheard-of discovery of resurrection eventually shared the good news with someone.

So maybe that's what the abrupt, unsatisfying ending to Mark's gospel is intended to do: to spur you and me to step up and do what those tomb-hunting women were reluctant to do at first – we're to spread the word that

...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him [may not perish] but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.<sup>2</sup>

What does Easter mean for you and me? That God's unconditional, generous love which was able to defeat the finality of death can bring new hope, new possibilities, new life into the struggles we face.

- God so loves the world that anybody and everybody is welcomed and accepted and embraced by God, and it doesn't matter whether you feel worthy of God's love or not because God loves you anyway.
- God so loves the world to give us hope to overcome problems with our physical and mental health, and if cure isn't possible, to be able to accept the adjustments that will be needed going forward.
- God so loves the world that we are given patience and determination to persevere while we're looking for new employment.
- God so loves the world that God offers hope to adults and children seized by the grip of addiction, and strength to the people who love and care about them.
- God so loves the world that we can avoid being controlled by the money we have or by the money we've lost. Instead, God's love can guide us to take the money that comes our way and use it in a manner that brings people together and lifts them up rather than beating them down and driving them apart.
- God so loves the world that we can find the grace and strength and humility and acceptance to take the first steps in repairing bruised or shattered relationships between parents and children, between siblings, between friends.
- God so loves the world that young people are filled with hope and determination to inspire political action to reduce the reckless use of firearms.
- God so loves the world that you are given the strength to keep going when you feel devastated and abandoned and lost because of the pain of grief.
- God so loves the world as to place in your path someone who will truly listen when you need to talk about scary, overwhelming thoughts and feelings.
- God so loves the world that despite a history of nations that seem only to know how to spar and prod and antagonize each other, we can hope for peace and pray for peace and call for peace and work for peace in our world.

The gospel of Mark ends on the printed page, but the good news of God's love leaps off the page: Christ who died is alive. What Easter means for us is that our thoughts, our speech, our actions, our very lives proclaim the truth penned by the apostle Paul in Romans Chapter 8: "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> John 3:16-17 New Revised Standard Version

<sup>3</sup> Romans 8:37-39 New Revised Standard Version