

Our Story to Tell

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
April 4, 2021—Easter

- Mark 16:1-8 CEB When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' dead body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. ³They were saying to each other, "Who's going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?" ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) ⁵Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled. ⁶But he said to them, "Don't be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.^[a] He has been raised. He isn't here. Look, here's the place where they laid him. ⁷Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you." ⁸Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Every year, as I prepare for Easter, I remember some unsolicited advice I once received when I was fresh out of seminary. I was serving as an associate pastor at a large Presbyterian church in the suburbs of Detroit. Our town's local clergy association met monthly to promote Christian unity, of course, and also to drink coffee while we "talked shop." There were Methodist and Lutheran pastors, Episcopal and Roman Catholic priests, Hungarian Reformed and Presbyterian clergy, and preachers from the Baptist and Evangelical churches. At the meeting where we were working out the details for our annual community Good Friday service, the veteran Baptist pastor turned to me and said, "Son, if you can't preach a good Easter sermon, you'd best get out of the business."

For someone who had never prepared an Easter sermon before, talk about pressure! I tried not to let it get to me... but all these years later I haven't forgotten it either. But what constitutes a "good Easter sermon," anyway? The good news of the gospel can't get any better, regardless of how "good" a sermon about it may be.

...But I will say this: When you look at the story of Christ's resurrection as it's told in the four gospels of the New Testament, the version we heard this year from the Gospel of Mark seems incomplete and consequently a bit disappointing. By comparison, in their descriptions of Easter morning and the events that followed, gospel writers Matthew, Luke and John express the startled, puzzled, *and overjoyed* feelings of the women and other disciples. But not Mark.

Let's remember why *anything* was happening so early on that Sunday morning, that very first Easter Day. Sunrise brought the first daylight after the end of the Sabbath. Early that morning certain women went to the tomb to carry out a funeral ritual for Jesus that they'd run out of time for on Friday: they went to wash and shroud the body. They weren't expecting to discover their beloved Master and Friend had been raised from death to new life. That's why they were surprised, even frightened, to discover the tomb open and empty.

Now, the other three gospels present stories of the Resurrected Christ appearing to the men and women who were his followers. Jesus met them outside the tomb, on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, behind locked doors in Jerusalem, or on the road

leading from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Jesus appeared to believers. He spoke to them. He gave them instruction and encouragement.

But not in the version we heard today. In Mark's gospel the angelic messenger told the women that Jesus had been raised, and that they should relay that news to Peter and the other disciples.

But they didn't. Mark's gospel ends by telling the reader that they were overcome with terror and dread. They fled from the tomb. They were so scared that they *didn't* tell Peter and the other disciples. They didn't say anything to anyone.

In fact, the original Greek language version of the gospel contains a grammatical oddity that accentuates the abruptness of the end of Mark's gospel. It ends with the Greek word that means "for" or "because," as in, "They were so afraid that they said nothing to anyone, because..." And the text just leaves us hanging.

...But perhaps that abruptness makes this the most engaging of the four gospels. You see, the abruptness of Mark's gospel ending leaves it to us to carry on the story. Like the women at the tomb, we hear the good news. But unlike the women who fled in terror and dread, we have the courage from faith to embrace the good news.... To believe it.... To live our lives accordingly, confident in God's power over all powers, even death. Yes, death will claim our lives one day, but it will not end God's claim on us as God's beloved children.

The women at the tomb were overwhelmed by the surprise of Christ's resurrection to new life. We can't fault them for being surprised, frightened, unsure what to do. But now we know the gift of Easter. Now we know that the signs of new life they discovered signaled God's gift of new life to each of us.

Christians are sometimes called "Easter people" because we live with trust in God's everlasting care. The promise of eternal life enables us to see new opportunities in this life. Let me briefly suggest four such opportunities:

- First, as we continue to slowly emerge from the perils and constraints of the pandemic, we will have a new depth of appreciation for the freedoms in living our everyday lives.
- Second, we are developing a new, more urgent awareness of society's ability and responsibility for addressing a history of discrimination against minority populations.
- Third, knowing the truth declared in 1 John 4:19 that we are able to love because God first loved us, we find new encouragement to risk deeper, more honest relationships with friends and, yes, even our own families.
- And fourth, when our loved ones die we need not fear losing them to the abyss of death, for Christ's resurrection declares that in life and in death we belong to the God of Earth and Heaven, we belong the Keeper of now and eternity, we belong to the Heavenly Father of our crucified and Risen Savior Jesus Christ.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, we go from the place of the tomb not overcome by fear and dread but eager to share our joy and hope. Today and every day, as disciples of the Risen Christ, let us live our very lives dedicated to glorifying and serving the God who we know as the Almighty! Amen.