

April 1, 2018 (Easter)



**“GIVING UP...DEATH:
EMBRACING LIFE”**

Mark 16:1-8

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“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.”¹

Wait a minute! Wait a minute! “They said nothing to anyone!” “They were afraid!” This doesn’t seem to be the Easter gospel message that I’ve known so well over the years. What about you? Can you believe it?

I mean, I followed Mark up until that point in the lesson. The women come to the tomb to anoint the body of Jesus who had just died a few days ago. On the way there, they wonder who will roll away the stone because it is so big; too heavy for them to open by themselves. When they get there, they find that the stone is already rolled away and the tomb is wide open. They step down inside to find a young man dressed in a white robe who tells them not to be afraid. Somehow he knows they are looking for Jesus and tells them that he has been raised. The young man tells them to go and tell his disciples and Peter what has happened because they, too, will soon experience the resurrection for themselves in Galilee.

ALL THAT SOUNDS LIKE EASTER! But this fleeing the tomb, seized by terror and amazement, and not telling anyone because they are afraid, is not the Easter message that most of us have come to know and cherish over the years.

Where is John’s Gospel story where Mary Magdalene encounters Jesus in the garden and then runs off to tell the others about her experience? What in the world was the writer of Mark’s gospel thinking? This can’t be the end of the story, can it? Is it even Easter if those to whom the good news is entrusted are seized by fear and tell no one that the Resurrection has occurred; that Jesus is ALIVE??? How do we even know that the Resurrection happened? How will the world find out?

You know what, though? You and I aren’t the only ones that might be uncomfortable with this passage. Mark’s gospel is said to be the oldest of the four gospels in the New Testament. The oldest manuscripts of this gospel end the book at verse eight. In our Bibles, however, at the end of Mark’s account is a sort of alternative ending that begins just following our passage today. Apparently others may have struggled with this ending as well.

Verse nine, found in later manuscripts, continues the story: “Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.”² At least someone tells the story, but even the disciples struggled to believe it. Mary Magdalene preaches the first sermon, but the disciples find it difficult to believe.

As much as we might appreciate John’s account of the Resurrection, I have come to find some comfort in Mark’s version of the events, as well. While it leaves us with lots of questions like “So, how did the world first hear that Jesus had risen from the dead?” or “How did we get to know about Easter?,” I am attracted to the real human emotions that Mark’s account seems to evoke within us.

I’m not so sure that I know what I would have done if I had been there. Would I have left shaking my head like Peter and John in other accounts? Would I have had conversations like the women did on the way to the tomb about who would roll away the stone? Would I have wept outside the tomb like Mary in John’s gospel until Jesus called me by name? Or would I have run in fear and trembling from the encounter I had just experienced? Would my mouth have seized shut and made my experience unspeakably too deep for words? I don’t know.

What I do know is this: **Resurrection happened when the disciples and the world least expected it and EVERYONE missed the event.** Jesus rose from the dead and despite talking about it during his lifetime, no one anticipated what would happen in the tomb that morning. In fact, there are no eyewitness accounts to the resurrection. No one saw Jesus rise from the dead. No one was in the tomb when Jesus’ body rose up from the grave. They simply saw his resurrected body at a later moment. Even Mary Magdalene, by John’s account, only saw the resurrected Jesus, but did not see the actual event. **AND YET THE WORLD WAS INFUSED WITH RESURRECTION LIFE FROM THAT VERY FIRST EASTER EXPERIENCE!**

In the various gospel accounts of resurrection, we get the whole range of human emotions from grief and sorrow, to fear and trembling, to excitement and joy. We get all the emotions that life brings to us. Wait a minute! Isn’t that what resurrection is all about? **NEW LIFE!!!** And why shouldn’t the disciples have experienced a variety of emotions as they struggled to understand, to grasp that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead? Isn’t that what happens when the resurrection gets ahold of you? You begin to experience **LIFE!!!** Fearful or joyful; sorrowful or hopeful, the early disciples were seized by the resurrection that first Easter.

And it is Resurrection that continues to seize our world even to this day. While there are plenty of people who would have us believe how horrible the world is and is becoming, God is always working to redeem, to give life, to embrace us in the power of resurrection love!

Throughout this Lenten season, we have spent time considering how we might give up the attitudes and actions that keep us from embracing the life that God offers to us in Jesus Christ. We’ve talked about giving up fear, perfectionism, scarcity, shame, bitterness, and expectations that we might embrace faith, imperfection, abundance, grace, joy, and the cross. On Easter

morning, God invites us to journey to a tomb where we learn how to give up on death's sting that we might embrace the life that God has for us and for the world in Jesus Christ.

Perhaps we have come this morning like the women approaching the tomb that first Easter, so caught up in our what we are expecting in our own life's situations that we are missing the resurrection God intends for us. Perhaps we come and hear the good news, but leave wondering whether it was really true or really intended for us. Perhaps we come, and like Mary in John's account, we kneel down at the tomb and we find ourselves weeping in disbelief. Perhaps we hear the gospel, yet as in other accounts of Peter and the disciples, we struggle to believe.

My friends, the good news is that no matter what our experience this Easter, no matter how we encounter the gospel, no matter what we do with it; the good news is that there's no stopping the good news. Like it or not, the world is wrapped up in the Resurrection life that God invites us to embrace.

This past week, I gathered with a dear friend to celebrate her mom's life. As we were talking about her mom early in the week, we eventually began talking about her mom's deep faith. Her mom had grown up as the daughter of a Presbyterian minister. Over the years that I knew her, her mother and I had great conversations about her faith.

In our preparations for the service to celebrate her mom's life, my friend shared with me a quote that her mom cherished and used often. I'm told that it was a line by Richard Bach in his book, *Illusions: The Adventures of a Reluctant Messiah*. Bach once wrote these simple words: "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly."

On Easter, we approach the tomb and expect the end of the world as we know it, yet the Master is at work. Even when we hear the good news, we may wonder about it, while the Master has been at work inside the tomb. Often our perspective is limited, as the Master has been working to move a stone away. Still, the good news breaks forth one way another, whether we remain frozen in fear, have doubts in our hearts, or go out to boldly proclaim it, because the Master has been at work in our caterpillar lives. Somehow, the Master has created the butterfly and resurrection has infused the world with the life and love of God in Christ. It's why we boldly proclaim, "Christ is Risen!" (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

Ready for new life or not, Christ is Risen! (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

Having seen the Resurrection or missed any sign of it, Christ is Risen! (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

Sensing new life or stuck on Friday, Christ is Risen! (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

With fear and trembling or with joy and excitement, Christ is Risen! (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

With despair and sorrow or hope and peace, Christ is Risen! (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

Believing or filled with doubt, Christ is Risen! (Christ is Risen, indeed!)

And because Jesus is alive, the world is embraced by the life of God in Jesus Christ! Believe it or not, we're all wrapped up in the Resurrection!

¹ Mark 16:8, NRSV.

² Mark 16:9, NRSV.