

Easter Sunday

21st April 2019

Mark 16:1-8

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Resurrection Has Consequences

There's a church at the top of the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem called the Church of All Nations. It's a popular tourist destination, like most churches in Israel. But on this one, sitting right over the top of the front entrance, is a sign that reads, "no explanations inside the church."

The sign was obviously intended to discourage talkative tour guides from disturbing those who came to the church to worship, but it's an interesting piece of advice for Easter morning. No explanations inside the church.

All the gospels include a story of an empty tomb this morning. The details differ between the accounts, but an empty tomb is one of the few stories about Jesus that all four gospels have in common. But I have always been drawn to Mark's account more than any other. And the reason for that is because, like the sign at the Church of All Nations, Mark does not try to explain anything. He simply writes that the women arrived to find an empty tomb and a young man in a white robe who tells them that Jesus is not there. He has been raised and has gone ahead of them to Galilee. And the

women fled the tomb in fear and amazement.

That's the end of Mark's gospel. Now a later scribe at some point went back and added another dozen verses because he didn't like the ambiguity of Mark's original ending. But I prefer to think Mark intended to leave the ending open like that, without explanation.

Mark's gospel was written around 40 years after Jesus' death. So early readers of Mark's gospel had already decided how to respond to this news of an empty tomb, even though Mark left the ending open for us to figure out our own responses. And the response of early Christians to this story of an empty tomb was to come together each week and retell the story, share a meal, help others, and pray.

But one thing the early church did not do was to celebrate Easter Sunday. Or

at least they didn't celebrate Easter as a special once a year holiday. That came later in church history. Instead, the early church's first response to the empty tomb was to start gathering on Sunday mornings, the same morning the women found the empty tomb—the morning the women woke up expecting to encounter death, but were instead confronted with new life.

So the church responded to Mark's story of an empty tomb by coming together every Sunday morning and celebrating resurrection. Early Christians did not celebrate Easter Sunday because they understood that every Sunday was Easter.

You may not be aware of this, but today, April 21st, is an important day in history. On this date in 1509, exactly 510 years ago today, Henry VIII was crowned king of England. 230 years ago

today, in 1789, John Adams was sworn in as the first ever United States Vice President, 9 days before Washington himself was sworn in as President. Today in 1967 was the first time the Los Angeles Dodgers were ever rained out of a baseball game, after 737 consecutive home games with no rain. That's some seriously predictable weather. For those in my generation, today in 1984 was the day that Michael Jackson's song, Thriller, was finally knocked off of #1 after 37 weeks at the top by the song Footloose. That same day, the CDC discovered the virus that causes AIDS. And the last one, today in 1997, the ashes of Timothy Leary and Gene Roddenberry were launched into space.

So why bother to share all of this, other than the fact that I clearly got distracted by the website

Brainy History for far too long this week and needed to find a way of working that into my sermon? Because out of all of those, and many more important historical events that took place this day in history, we aren't here this morning celebrating any of those. And the reason we aren't is because they happened a long time ago and have virtually no effect on any of our lives today.

Nor are we gathered here today simply because that story we read in Mark's gospel happened on this day in history 1,989 years ago (or whenever it actually was, but the date is beside the point). We aren't here because something happened a long time ago that was worth remembering. Nor do I think most of us are here today, or here every Sunday, because we believe that something that happened 2000 years

ago really only makes a difference after we die. We are here because however we understand resurrection, we believe that resurrection makes a difference in our lives today.

My first year out of seminary was a rough one. I ended up at a church that was not a good fit. So despite spending the previous 5 years of my life jumping through all the academic, ecclesiastical, and vocational hoops necessary to become a minister in our denomination, after one year in that church, I was done. I turned in my resignation to the Session and accepted a job working in the IT department at Sandhills Community College.

I loved that job. It was decent pay, good benefits, I never had to work weekends, and I was doing something I loved. And then about 6 months in, on a

Friday afternoon on the last day of the fiscal year, I was summarily informed that my job no longer existed. I was handed a severance check and a box to clean out my office. I still vividly recall that afternoon as a low point in my life.

Suddenly, I was looking at a mortgage and a boat-load of student loans for a career I didn't want, and the job I did want had just let me go. I managed to find another job as a software engineer, but that job involved a LOT of travel—I was gone 3 weeks a month most of the time. It also involved a lot of unpaid overtime and weekends because our software supported some critical things like water plants and hospitals.

And then one day I got a phone call from Jim Austin who was chairing the Pastor Nominating Committee for a small church in Limestone,

TN. And Jim was persistent. Annoyingly persistent. And I can't really emphasize the annoyingly part of that enough. But Jim's persistence brought us to Tennessee and brought me back into the ministry. Without that, I would certainly not be here today, in a job that I love and with a community of people that I love, a place that shares my values and encourages me to live into those values every day.

Is that resurrection?

Well, for me it is certainly new life, new hope, new possibility that came out of a Good Friday time in my life. But I'm not here today just because that good thing happened to me 18 years ago, either. I'm here because I believe that resurrection still happens.

Easter is not about explaining what happened in that story we heard. Easter is about believing that what-

ever happened in that story is still happening, and that it is something in which we can take part. Bishop Rowan Williams captured the essence of Easter when he wrote, "Easter is not a matter of our questioning the resurrection, but of allowing this story of resurrection to question us. Who are we now? Who do we hope to become now that we have encountered this story about a God who refuses to let death have the final word?"

The message of Easter, indeed, the message of Sunday, is not simply resurrection. The message is "resurrection has consequences."

