

Easter Evidence

Sermon by Pastor Patricia Geiseman
April 1, 2018
Easter Sunday

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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 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. 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." 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.

Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)*

The bottom drawer in my tall file cabinet is half-filled with funeral sermons. I can't seem to let them go. Some date back almost forty years. Some are sermons for persons I knew very well, whose deaths were difficult for me. Others are for persons I didn't know at all, but whose lives and deaths mattered a great deal to others. Many persons were old, but some were not.

For a number of years now, the funeral sermons begin the same: We gather this morning to remember to give thanks for the life and love, faith and friendship of ... Marlene, John, Jack, Robert, Warren ... your wife, mother, husband, father, sister, brother, and friend ... We remember and give thanks for the love of God, which held this person throughout his life and holds him now in death. We give thanks for the love of God, which holds us, too, in our loss and sadness.

In times of sadness, grief, and loss, we gather to give thanks for a person's life, for their legacy of light that lives on with God and with us.

On Easter morning we gather to give thanks for what God did in Jesus of Nazareth. The stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. The curtain that hid God's presence is torn in two. The heavens are opened!

We celebrate that God's power to transform lives is loose in the world. On Easter Day, God—Holy Love—breaks through with *Hallelujahs* in our festive worship, with music, flowers, and crowds, and in our silence, fears, and lonely places.

This is Mark's year in the three-year lectionary. So, instead of reading the more beloved Easter story from John, we have the oldest, brief, and seemingly unfinished narrative. We might miss the lovely story of Mary mistaking Jesus for the Gardener, clinging to the Risen Christ. But today we will stay in Mark.

Here the women go to the tomb at sunrise. The stone is rolled away. We know something is up. The women are met not by the corpse of the crucified, but by a young man dressed in white. Mark doesn't refer to him as an angel, but the conversation sure sounds like one!

Do you remember the number one message of angels in the Bible? *Do not be afraid.*

The young man says, "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified ... he is not here." The young man is not offering resurrection proof from the evidence of the empty tomb. He continues: "Go, tell his disciples ... he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

Then the last verse: "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."

The story stops here. Like a dramatic movie that ends with too many loose ends. Like a defective DVD. This abrupt ending was considered unacceptable really early. All kinds of other endings to Mark were added on. If you look in your Bibles, you can see at least two of them. We can understand why.

It's hard and unsettling to be left with a question. To be left in silence and fear. Surely, we know real life is full of loose ends. Endings do not always satisfy. And, in many ways, the world is less stable than we would like to imagine.

The story leaves us with dissatisfaction and anticipation. Maybe Mark is acknowledging that disappointment is a universal experience. And ... it could be that what Mark means is that God's faithfulness completes the story. Then and now.

One thing we can say about Jesus: He refused to leave the world the way it was. He stepped over boundaries and rescued people beyond help.

This is both frightening and promising. Because like the Marys and Salome, we are afraid. We are afraid of more than snakes and spiders, clowns and closed spaces. We are afraid for the world, for our well-being and safety. We worry about government stability, global relationships and our own. We wonder about whether we will have enough money, enough health, and enough time to do what we want.

Will our children and grandchildren grow up to be good people? Will they be safe in school, and on the street? We worry about the earth. Will it continue to nourish and sustain us as it is intended?

We are afraid of getting sick. And we are afraid of losing people we love. This is on the top of most personal fears. We are afraid of feeling like the disciples—abandoned—and like the Marys—overwhelmed. With no words.

What can we say to our fears? To national and global and personal unrest? What can we say to the violence, the domination and destructive forces that defy God, that seem so strong and so close?

The Easter message that the dream of God is alive. This good news that often escapes us.

We want to fill in the gaps of the open-ended questions of our lives and our world. We are desperate for happy endings that make sense and fit with our *Weltanschauung*, our worldview. We fill our empty spaces with more ... more of what? Distractions, like the Internet, shopping, stuff. Activities. Alcohol.

Like the first Easter people, we have known loss and certainly disappointment. We may flee or we may freeze. We may ask: Why is this happening? When will I feel better? When will she approve of me? Will I be able to forgive? How can I let go? What will the future hold? Am I brave enough to do new things?

And when there are times when our lives have changed a lot, when someone close to us has died or leaves, or we have other huge changes, we ask big questions of review: Now what is my life about? Now what do I believe? Now what do I wish I had done? Now which direction shall I go? What of my old self shall I take along?

When I visit people in the hospital, my prayer often begins with gratitude: "Gracious God, giver of all good gifts, we thank you for Abundant Love that comes to us in so many ways ... for the love and support of family and friends." And I name them.

"And for the medical staff ... for doctors, nurses, technicians and others for their skill and compassion." And almost always I add a thank you for the congregation of St. Mark's" "... for support and care and kindness shown."

I ask the Lord of the Universe, who broke open the heavens, tore the temple curtain in two ... and rolled away the stone ...

Bring light! Healing and hope!

A story came out of the London blitz during World War II after weeks of non-stop bombing by the German Air Force. It makes the point of how it feels to be alone in the universe. A child ended his nighttime prayers, "And, dear God, please take care of yourself, because if anything happens to you, we're all sunk." [Joan Chittister, *Uncommon Gratitude*]

The young man dressed in white, who sounded a lot like an angel, told the terrified women that Jesus *had been raised*. He was going ahead of them to Galilee. He was raised ... go back to the beginning ...remember his life!

When Jesus ministered by feeding the hungry, driving out demons, preaching words of hope to the brokenhearted, healing those in distress, and breaking down the barrier walls that divide people, people were “raised.” In Mark’s Gospel, Peter’s mother-in-law is raised from a fever; the paralyzed man is restored to movement; Levi the tax collector rises up to follow Jesus; a man with a withered hand, on the margins, is healed; Jesus rises in a storm and stills the chaos; a young girl is awakened from deadly slumber; a boy threatened with fire and water by a demon is raised into freedom from Torment; a blind beggar rises up to have Jesus restore his sight.

Clearly, the resurrection does not wait until the end of Mark’s Gospel! It appears over and over again in Galilee as God’s kingdom breaks in with transforming power.
[workingpreacher.org]

And so it is with us, I am sure. We may have felt paralyzed by fear, or grief, laid low with a fever, or hot with shame or anger. We may have been overwhelmed by the waves of despair, been blind to the needs around us. But Resurrection power does not wait until the end of our lives! God’s transforming power comes in our lives again and again. We experience healing, acceptance, hope, compassion, and companionship.

And we, in different ways, experience new life. Jean Paul Richter wrote, “Winter, which strips the leaves from around us / makes us see the distant regions they formerly concealed.” Indeed. [from Joan Chittister, *Uncommon Gratitude*]

We give thanks for the lives of those who have gone before us, for the light of their lives that shines the way. We give thanks for the many ways we have been raised up already. Together, we look beyond the empty tomb, beyond the fears and failures of our lives, to the larger grace of great things that seem to hide like Easter eggs, just out of view.

Evidence of Easter is seen in our lives of gratitude and openness, and in our willingness to trust in the truth of God’s reconciling power.

Maya Angelou wisely wrote, “If you must look back, do so forgivingly. If you must look forward, do so prayerfully. However, the wisest thing you can do is be present in the present...gratefully.” [from Dorothy Butler Bass, in *The Christian Century*]

But when life is hard, gratitude seems impossible. This is where community comes in with support. There are times we ride the waves of gratitude until we are swept in ourselves. We gather here for worship every single weekend. And no matter what, we give thanks. We do. No matter how many crises and terrible events have befallen the world and ourselves, we give thanks.

Gratitude is more than passive reflection; it’s about building resilience.

It's more than being thankful for things that have already occurred and can't be changed; it's about ensuring the benefits of what comes next. It's about making sure that tomorrow, and the day after, we will have something to be grateful for.

Resilience is our capacity to grow into our best selves: to be healthy, creative, balanced, and mature people.

Gratitude makes us hopeful. And it arises from practice! And practice takes time. Gratitude is more than a feeling; it is an ethic. An Easter-oriented ethic.

So! Gratitude builds resilience, and resilience builds hope. Jesus has been raised and so have we. He goes ahead of us and with us on the road. The light of hope shines on the way. We are not lost but here; not afraid but free; not alone but together.

And for this we give thanks!

Happy Easter and Amen.

Resources:

Dorothy Butler Bass, "Practicing Gratitude," *the Christian Century*, March 28, 2018

Joan Chittister, *Uncommon Gratitude*

Feasting on the Word: Lent through Eastertide

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