

Title: Eternal Peace and Joy

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we gather once again after recounting Jesus' death last week to rejoice in his resurrection today; we give you thanks and praise for accepting us to live with you eternally; we pray through the one who dwells with us forever, Christ Jesus. Amen.

I have read about near-death experiences and I assumed that they were rare. When I was a hospice chaplain, I had four or five people share with me their near-death experiences. These experiences are apparently more numerous than I had thought.

I remember one patient, in particular. She was on oxygen, which limited her activities and how far she could go from home. This frustrated her. She was a smoker and had to remove her oxygen when she decided to light up. When the weather was good, she liked being on her patio. She believed in God, but was not a church-goer.

The patient's near-death experience happened when she was on an operating table and her heart stopped. She rose in the room and saw herself and what the medical people were doing and what they said.

After leaving the operating room, she described a light. The light was at the same time bright, but not blinding, and the light had a personal quality to it. She felt a calmness and love from the light that she never experienced before or since. She was drawn to the light. Then she got a message. The message was that this was not her time and that she would have to go back.

Later when she told her surgeon what had happened to her, the surgeon told her that her brain was oxygen starved and what she experienced was from the lack of oxygen. She told the surgeon, in detail, what he did and what he said and challenged the surgeon to explain how she knew what he did if her eyes were closed and dying on the table. The surgeon had no explanation.

She thought that this meant that she had some unfinished work or business to do, but she could never figure out what that could be. Maybe it was to be there for her husband and a son who, though in his twenties, did not have the

where-with-all to live on his own. It seemed to me that, while on hospice, her husband had a chance to learn to live on his own. The patient was the monarch of her domain.

She then told me that she wished she was back to that place she was during her near-death experience. It was so wonderful to be there, she wanted to be back. She very much looked forward to her death. She did die on hospice service.

There is something beyond this life. Call it heaven or whatever you like, but God is there waiting for us. Jesus reconciled us to God and defeated death.

Let me set the stage. Jesus was tried and executed by the state. His disciples ran off probably fearing their arrest, too. However, a few female followers watched from a distance witnessing Jesus' death.

Let me say that there is no way that the Romans would take Jesus down from the cross unless they were certain that he was dead. The Romans were very practiced in the art of executions. The Romans were very precise in all that they did. When Jesus came down from the cross, he was certainly dead.

It was the custom of the time that people were buried in rock hewn tombs. These were not permanent. Eventually, when there were only bones, the bones would be collected and placed in an ossuary. The tomb would then be available for the next person.

Some kind of rock was used in the front of tomb to keep animals out. This was not like some big cave that some drawings might have you believe. They were at ground level and no more than three feet in diameter.

Religiously, there were complications about the timing of the crucifixion. Jesus was executed on a Friday. At sundown, the Sabbath began. Bodies would not be allowed to stay on crosses at sundown. If the victim was not yet dead, then a soldier would simply end their suffering, usually by breaking their shin bones. This particular Sabbath was no ordinary Sabbath. It was also the Passover. And Passover had its own rituals and rules. The main thing was that no one worked on the Sabbath.

The women who observed Jesus' death and his body placed in a tomb wanted to do the right thing by custom and religion for his body. Because of the Sabbath, they had to wait for Sunday morning to anoint the body. Mark names names: Mary Magdalene, James' mother Mary, and Salome.

These women were caught up in having all the necessary ointments and spices but failed to have a plan for moving the rock away from the tomb entrance. "Who can we get to roll the stone away?" This was apparently discussed as they were in route to the tomb.

Well, their prayers were answered. The stone was already rolled away. This had to be disconcerting. Grave robbers were not uncommon. The grave robbers wouldn't know that Jesus had nothing to steal. After all, it was Joseph of Arimathea's grave and he was likely wealthy. It could have been a case of mistaken identity.

The women had to know if anything was disturbed. They went in.

A normal tomb that was used in the day would not be big enough for anyone to be sitting up inside. People were very practical. It was expensive to dig a hole in rock. The only way for someone to sit inside a tomb would be for it to not be a tomb, but a shallow cave. And there are plenty of shallow caves in the Holy Land.

When the women went in, they saw a young man. Was this a grave robber? It wouldn't be Jesus, because Jesus is dead.

The women were alarmed. What were the intentions of this man? Would he do them harm? What does he know about Jesus' body, because it is obviously not there? Did they get the right tomb? Why is he wearing white? Was this man lying in wait for them?

Their looks of fear must have been obvious. The young man attempted to reassure them. There is no need for alarm. He knew they were looking for Jesus. However, Jesus was raised. He invited the women to see where Jesus was laid, in case they had doubts.

Then he gave them instructions. They are to tell the disciples and Peter, in particular, that Jesus is on his way to Galilee. They are to go there to see

him. He also reminded them that Jesus said that this was going to happen. I think he was implying that they shouldn't be as surprised as they appear to be.

According to Mark, they did leave the tomb. They ran for their lives. They were seized with terror.

Because of their fear, they told no one of what they saw and heard.

That is where Mark's gospel ended. Once scholars, researchers, and archeologists discovered that this where Mark's original gospel ended, they have been trying to figure out why it ended so abruptly.

Apparently, scribes who made copies of Mark's gospel were equally uncomfortable with this. They added at least two alternate endings. In what it called the short ending, a scribe added two sentences where the women did eventually tell the story and Jesus sent the disciples out to the world proclaiming salvation. A longer ending written by someone else has some resurrection stories and that unfortunate thing about snake handling.

I think that Mark wanted people to be uncomfortable with his ending. I don't think that he anticipated others adding different endings to his gospel. Obviously, the women did eventually spill the beans. Otherwise, Mark would not have written a gospel.

I think Mark was intending for the reader to be so uncomfortable with the ending that the reader would be compelled to tell others about the resurrection that Mark so inconveniently left out. Of course, some decided to add their versions to their copies of Mark.

Nearly, 2,000 years later, it is left to us to tell the story. Of course, we are not witnesses to Jesus' resurrection. But we have the stories. We have our belief. Paul said that during one of Jesus' resurrection appearances, there were 500 people who saw him.

We are here to celebrate the resurrection. This is the Christian hope. Death is the final enemy. Death is no longer a permanent condition. Instead, it is a doorway. Our bodies were never designed to last forever. We can and do get

replacement parts like taking the car into the shop. But even the replacement parts wear out.

Eternal life is only possible with Jesus breaking the barrier of death and through which, we are invited to an eternal, spiritual life.

When I was a hospice chaplain, I was often asked what happens after we die. My stock reply was, “I don’t exactly know, because I haven’t been there yet. But I believe we will be in a place of total love, in the presence of God.” This will be an experience of such utter joy that it is indescribable.

That is why Easter is so important and worthy of our celebrations. We celebrate the resurrection every Sunday. We are an Easter people.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Text: **Mark 16:1–8** (NRSV)

16 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. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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.^{a1}

^a Some of the most ancient authorities bring the book to a close at the end of verse 8. One authority concludes the book with the shorter ending; others include the shorter ending and then continue with verses 9-20. In most authorities verses 9-20 follow immediately after verse 8, though in some of these authorities the passage is marked as being doubtful.#

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Mk 16:1–8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.