

## The Unfinished Easter Story

Let me first acknowledge the strangeness of having a second virtual Easter gathering. Last April we did this united by a common purpose—do you remember “flattening the curve?” Or the 8 o’clock howling by the good people of Bozeman, in appreciation of health workers? This year, after a year of crisis upon crisis, dissension and disagreement, hope and disappointment and courage and grief, it’s hard to believe we are still waiting to reach the end of the tunnel of this pandemic. I want to thank you for your loyalty to the church through this strange and traumatic year, through confusion and adaptation and learning new ways to be the church.

I suppose it is fitting that in this strangeness, today we are reading the strangest of the gospel testimonies to what happened on that first Easter morning. The text I just read from Mark’s gospel has an empty tomb, but no resurrection appearances. It has an angel testifying that Jesus has been raised, saying “Do not be alarmed,” but it ends with the women still feeling terror and amazement. I think they were alarmed. And even though the angel gave specific instructions about what to tell the other disciples and Peter, Mark tells us “they said nothing to anyone.” The story comes to an abrupt halt. It is unfinished, incomplete.

If you were reading along in your own Bible, or remember seeing the end of chapter 16 before, you probably have noticed that there are additional verses appended to verse 8. Many Bibles entitle these additional verses “The Shorter Ending” and “The Longer Ending.” These additional verses give more satisfying conclusions to the gospel. They reflect some of the stories included in Matthew and Luke. And they also include some “why you should believe in the resurrection” comments which scholars tell us were likely written a century later than the rest of the gospel. They aren’t from the original. They are add-ons.

It’s confusing. Even if you aren’t a scholar, even if you don’t know a word of Greek, an alpha from an omega, you can tell that chapter 16 doesn’t all fit together. Naturally, there are many theories about this. Was Mark interrupted while writing, and never got back to his manuscript? Did he, in fact, write more, but the ending was lost? Or did Mark intend to give us an awkward ending to his gospel?

In this awkward time, the awkward ending seems to have a message for us. It invites us to stay in the moment with Mary, Mary, and Salome, that moment of terror and amazement, a moment of silence in the presence of something they’ve never before imagined, much less experienced. It was “unprecedented,” not just in their lifetime or ours, but in the course of human events, in cosmic history. Maybe there was an explanation for how the stone was rolled away from the tomb. Maybe there was a reason Jesus’ body was gone. Maybe the divine messenger was an apparition, or a mere human. Maybe they heard his message incorrectly. But put it all together, and this is a frightening moment, a moment to say nothing to anyone, because what could they say? Who would ever believe them? And if they did say something, wouldn’t that be risking exactly what got Jesus crucified?

Stay with me in this awkward moment, Mary, Mary, and Salome’s awkward moment. Think about what the young man in a white robe said. *Jesus of Nazareth has been raised.* Jesus of Nazareth--he was a real human being, from a real town in Galilee. A carpenter’s son. Whom they met when he became an itinerant preacher and healer. They could still hear his voice in their minds, they knew his face and his mannerisms, they had seen him eating, drinking, laughing, crying. *Jesus of Nazareth has*

*been raised.* What could this mean? They had watched him die. They had seen his bleeding, lifeless body lowered from the cross, carried here, laid in the tomb, and the stone rolled in front.

We are suspended in time with these witnesses to the empty tomb, suspended in their moment of fear and uncertainty and loss. It's not a comfortable place, but it is a place that is true to so much of our living on earth, and particularly true to our life in this time of pandemic. Like the women at the tomb, we are grieving, for we join the world in grieving the loss of 2.7 million beloved ones, the loss of a year of memories made with friends and family, and for many, the loss of economic security and hope for the future. We share the uncertainty the women felt—is it safe to be in a crowd? Am I okay to speak my truth? What will the future be like? And like the women, we know fear in a new way, for fear has gripped the world for over a year.

And yet today, by faith we see the empty tomb and wonder what it means. By faith, we hear the divine messenger telling us not to be alarmed, Jesus has been raised. And by faith, we hear him telling us to go to Galilee—whatever that might mean in 21<sup>st</sup> century America—for there we will meet him, Jesus Christ.

This unfinished Easter story is waiting for us to join God in completing the story of salvation. This not-so-happy ending reflects God's ongoing work of redemption, anticipating a future which has intruded on the present but is not yet fully here, the reign of God which has been inaugurated but is not yet fulfilled. The kin-dom of God is among us, and in us, and for us. It is here and now when the future intrudes on the present, just as the empty tomb interrupted everything the women thought they knew about the way the world works.

So today we need to ponder what it would mean for us to go to Galilee to meet the risen Christ. For the first disciples, Galilee was their starting place, where they came from. It was not the center of power or religious authority, it was the back country, where common people lived and worked and played, the surprising place where Jesus of Nazareth had initiated his ministry. The command to return to Galilee tells us of the freedom of the risen Christ. He is not bound by graveclothes nor stuck in a tomb, he is on his way in the world. He is not here, either, entombed in a sacred space, he is out there, where people are in need. You will meet him where you least expect him, when you give food to the hungry, release to the captives, and sight to the blind. You will meet him where he shows us he always is, So learn to expect him when you give a cup of cold water to the thirsty, a word of hope to the oppressed, a sign of compassion to the lonely. Go to Galilee. There, you will meet the risen Christ.

And there you will become part of God's unfinished story, the story which is unfolding, by God's grace, for the entire world. This is not primarily a story to lead us to our personal salvation, it is a story to embrace us as participants in God's mission for the reconciliation of the world. The instructions are an invitation to join what God began in Jesus Christ. And although Easter is the transforming moment in this great story, it is not the end of the story. Galilee is not the final destination on this journey. It's simply where the adventure continues, the drama of salvation unfolds next, and where Christ's disciples can begin again.

My friends, beloved ones, this time of fear, uncertainty, and loss is giving way to hope, and mission, and new life. The hate and violence which nailed Jesus to a cross did not have the last word. The terror and confusion which paralyzed Christ's disciples that first Easter morning did not last forever. They did go to Galilee, they did meet the risen Christ, and they were transformed to be the agents of God's continuing mission in the world. This is our story, too, should we decide to accept it. God's messenger instructs us to look beyond the pandemic, beyond the meanness of racial injustice, beyond

the horrors of gun violence, beyond the oppression of poverty, beyond the cloud of despair which seems to want to obscure the light of new life for the world. God's messenger promises that Christ is going there before us, and we will not be alone when we confront these evils. We will not be alone when we stand up for what is right. We will not be alone when we look out for those who are being abandoned on the side of the road. For Christ is there, and where Christ is, there is life. And hope. And love which is stronger than death.

So it's not just wishful thinking every year when we sound the trumpets and sing of our triumphant holy day. It's not just Christian escapism from the realities of the world. It is a proclamation of God's reality breaking into the world, an event from the past which tells of the future transforming the present. We think we understand time, but can you explain it? Physicist Alan Lightman says "Time is a measurement of change." (*The Christian Science Monitor Weekly*, 3/29/21, p. 18) Well, then, the resurrection of Jesus Christ exploded the concept of time before Einstein even had a chance to think about it! Because the resurrection of Jesus Christ changed everything. It is still changing everything.

It's okay to stand silent, like the women, absorbing this shocking news. (SILENCE) It's okay to feel some alarm, some amazement, and some terror. (SILENCE) But let that not be the end of today's story.

For God's future beckons us forward. God's promise is that resurrection life is available for all. Today we join Christ our Savior at his table of life, to experience a taste of his promised future. Our God is endlessly, eternally, everlastingly good, calling us forward from our Galilees into the world.

Jesus is not here, he has been raised from the dead.

Alleluia! Christ is risen indeed!