



March 31, 2024, Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

A Covenant of New Life

Prayer: God of unexplained mysteries and unexpected events, we rejoice today in the good news of Easter. You have kept covenant with us, and you hold us in your covenant even now. May the power of Christ's presence be real to us that we are changed and be renewed and made whole, by your love...

I want to emphasize how welcome each of you are here today: regulars and visitors. If you are visiting, I am relatively new here also; I am still getting to know people. I continue to appreciate the nametags many of you are wearing. If you are just joining us, I arrived on December 1, at the beginning of the busy season of Advent. This church is in transition between settled ministers. And supporting congregations in transition is my primary ministry now. You may have heard that the only constant in life is change. Let me put this recent transition in perspective for you: This church can trace its history back to 1719. So many, many things have transitioned here over the years. The congregations, ministers, buildings, and yes, theology. There are also things which provide continuity over time: scripture, people connecting with and caring for each other for generations, theology again, and celebrating God's love. In this church, particularly in this time of transition we live with the question about how to go forward -- with the choices available, now. An Easter question.

Churches are important community spaces, widely undervalued by our culture right now, where people can gather and meaningfully encounter one another, challenge and be challenged, support and be supported. Occasionally change the world, lives, communities. And how we do that needs to change, over time, as faces change, as the world changes, as our community changes.

Kaleigh and I have been preaching on the theme of Covenants in the Lenten season leading up to today. The symbols of our covenants are hidden in plain sight: water, land, bread, sabbath, and the human heart, to name a few. The church, this church, is part of a covenant we have with one another, with the worldwide body of Christ alive today, the church we have received from history, and the covenant extends to the church of the future. Neither the church of the past, nor the future are institutions we can influence very much – but we can influence today's church. We could redeem the past; we may be able to bless the future. In every age, God calls a people to himself. Now, you can imagine how many ways an institution, seeking to live

and follow in faith and discipleship could fall short of that goal, and has, (no end of negative examples out there) but there are also ways, sometimes much less spectacular, that it holds together. And has.

And today of all days, Easter morning, is a day when the story gets ahead of our understanding. This may be a hard moment to get the drift of what has happened, especially if you are just joining us. But -- ready or not -- the news is that there is no body. The tomb was empty. Something significant hidden in plain sight.

Of all the gospels, Mark's account of the resurrection leaves the most unsaid. The unnatural darkness that falls across the land at the hour of Jesus' crucifixion still seems to be influencing the last chapter.¹

There are important questions still hanging in the air. In 16 short chapters Mark tells us that Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan River, was tempted in the wilderness, called disciples to follow him, engaged in a significant teaching and healing 3 year tour in the region of Galilee, came to the attention of the authorities, was tried, convicted, and sentenced to death in Jerusalem, was crucified, pronounced dead...and then ... walked away from it all and back into his life. The disciples, having been with Jesus since the first chapter abandon him at his arrest, no one more vehemently than Peter. Even the crowds abandon him in favor of sparing another prisoner Barabas, from death. Pilate washes his hands of the whole sad business.

So, its early in the morning, the women come to the tomb. A young man -- maybe an angel(?) -- speaks to them, and says, "*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.*" But Mark does not tell us what they did next; the gospel ends just one verse later with the women fleeing from the place *in terror and amazement, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."* In the original Greek, the ending is even more abrupt, unusual in style:

Mark says something like, "Being awe struck, they told no one, for..." And he never finishes his thought. It is a 2000-year-old dangling phrase. Mark puts a fine point on ending without wrapping up the narrative. "*They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" End of story.

Wait, what had Jesus told them? What were they meant to remember? What could they pull forward from their experience?

There is an ending implied that is not written down. We are at the end of the story, so if you do not remember, you will need to go back and re-read. They had to have told someone at some point, Mark wrote it down and all this time later, we are here mulling it over, again. If on Sunday they were too overwhelmed with awe to say anything, what happened on Monday? After they caught their breath? Talked it over? When did their fear turn to faith?

The ending of Mark's gospel has been interesting to scholars, hearers, and readers for millennia. We ended our reading today where the most reliable ancient authorities ended the book of Mark. If you look at your Bible, you will notice that there are two other endings.

¹ Mark 15:33

Scholars tell us the alternative endings were added later. But the oldest ending is this one. Stopping where we did has traditionally placed the emphasis on the incompleteness of the text – placing the burden of interpretation on the people who hear it and read it. Looking at you now, do you know what comes next? Do you remember what Jesus said would happen? This is the last chapter, not the first, there have been some promises, and covenants established, leading up to this moment.

If you read the Bible regularly you become familiar with this feeling – not that you ever get used to it, just that it happens. You think *you* are reading the Bible. But suddenly, the Bible is reading *you*. What do you remember that God promised about what would happen when everything falls apart? When the shadow of Good Friday feels like it will not let you go? When politics, and leadership, friendship, and family are not coming through? Because they all fail us in time.

Do you remember what he said when he was still alive?

I would like to suggest this morning that each of us consider how this applies to our own anxieties, disappointments, failures. Not so much to help Mark get a better sense of how to end a narrative – you have a couple of those endings in your Bibles; but more for ourselves, how does the covenant still hold, in our lives, in light of this terrifying, awe inspiring, news, that sent the women running off unable to speak – they were so overwhelmed. There is a covenant that is still holding strong. What death have you witnessed? What rebirth is budding in your life early this spring? Mark’s “unfinished” account of Easter pointedly invites us to explore the unfinished business each of us has with the resurrection: the way the story has not ended but rather is continuing, still. Do you remember what he said? What Jesus asked us to remember about him, his love, his life?

We have been told that he is not here, that he will not stay nailed down, sealed in, all wrapped up in burial cloths and secured with appropriate spices. He will not be held by death. So, if we would follow him, it will not be to places of deadly certainty. It will be forward, into the future, out into whatever part of Galilee where you are going to be on Monday. That is where Jesus is, that is where Jesus will meet you. “And they were afraid.”

Today we are at the heart of the Christian message; the center of the mystery. Very simply: that in Jesus’ overcoming death, he offers us new life. It is a covenant which continues to hold. Hidden in plain sight and there is more than one form of new life, there is new life in this world, and new life in the next. God has already done this; and God extends an invitation to all of us, right now.

For any who are broken: and we are broken in many ways, Jesus offers us the opportunity once again, to come, to be renewed again, and to turn and walk from now on in the light of God. And in the end, when we are broken finally, when life is taken from our mortal bodies, Jesus offers new life, in communion with those who have gone before us...

The tomb is empty, and the story is open ended. Like the women at the tomb, we listen again to the evidence they found, the body was gone, we hear their testimony, and we are asked to “remember what he told us.” He walked out into Galilee; where there were many witnesses. If we came to the cemetery wanting proof, we do not get proof. What we get is life, forgiveness, a new day, a living Lord who is way out ahead of us; inviting us to go with him into resurrection.

What are you to do with such a story? This is a sermon you will have to finish for yourself. After all, you are the one who came here looking for Jesus. But he is not in his tomb; this is not a funeral; he is not dead. You just missed him. By this time in the morning, he is already up and around. He has gone on ahead. Our hopes rise with him. Go! Tell! Jesus is risen! Alleluia!

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Christ is our Light. From the LaSalette Festival of Light at the Shrine of LaSalette. 2009 Attleboro, MA