

Easter's Texts:

Isaiah 25:6–9

1 Corinthians 15:1–11

Mark 16:1–8

Victory of Death and Fear!**Pastor Jim Cords****April 4, 2021**

The Holy Gospel for our Easter celebration comes to us from the Gospel according to Mark, the sixteenth chapter:

Saturday evening, when the Sabbath ended, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James and Salome went out and purchased burial spices so they could anoint Jesus' body. Very early on Sunday morning, just at sunrise, they went to the tomb. On the way, they were asking each other, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" But as they arrived, they looked up and saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled aside.

When they entered the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said, "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died."

The women fled from the tomb trembling and bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened.

The Gospel of the Lord. Let us pray. Lord Jesus, thank you for letting us hear the Easter story. Help us to grasp the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, his victory over sin, death, and fear. Strengthen our faith that we might live in the embrace of your love and the fullness of the resurrected life you have for us. Amen.

We gather online to celebrate Easter, to celebrate the Resurrection. In fact, in the Christian church, every Sunday is a celebration of the Resurrection. So, happy Easter to you and to our world! I'm wondering, though, if this Gospel reading today is adequate to our celebration. The way it ended, "the women fled from the tomb trembling and bewildered and they said nothing to anyone because they were too frightened." (Mark 16:8) Wow! Ending the Easter Gospel with the thought of being too frightened. Just doesn't sound quite right to me. Now we do hear in the story that they saw a "young man clothed in a white robe sitting on the right side. The women were shocked, but the angel said 'Don't

be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead!" (Mark 16:5-6). Now that's the Easter message! He is risen from the dead! Hallelujah! So they hear the announcement of the Resurrection, but then there is that ending. I'm not sure I really like that ending.

Now our other readings are fabulous. We can relate to those. We can be drawn into the Easter celebration that's in those scriptures. We are also God's people as we hear in the second reading for today, who have welcomed the Good News. We stand firm in that gospel as Paul said that they did. That proclamation of good news is for us and for our world and that's a part of the Easter proclamation we want to be sure is heard in our sermon, in our lesson, in our worship, in our songs today. Forgiveness is ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus. Eternity and salvation are ours through the death and resurrection of Jesus. We claim it. We believe it. We stand firm in it. Paul even writes, "I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scripture said. He was buried and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said." (1 Cor. 15:3-4).

We also learn from Paul that the risen Christ was "seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500." (1 Cor. 15:5-6) at one time. Most of whom are still alive the text tells us. Living witnesses of the resurrected Christ available to those who are hearing Paul's letter read to them in the Corinthian Church. Wow! To still have people around who could say, "I was there. I saw the risen Christ with my own eyes" or, with Thomas, who can say, "I touched the sore in his side. I touched the wounds in his hand. It was Jesus and he's alive."

Then there's that amazing, amazing announcement from the prophet Isaiah, setting the hearts and expectations for God's people for the transformation that would come into the world because of the Messiah. The picture of celebration that would happen. The Lord "will spread a wonderful feast for all the people of the world," we are told. "It will be a delicious banquet with clear, well-aged wine and choice meat." and then most importantly, "he will remove the cloud of gloom, the shadow of death that hangs over the Earth. He will swallow up death forever! The Sovereign Lord will wipe away all tears."

This is what we celebrate on Easter Sunday. This is what we celebrate as a people of faith every day. As we recognize and live within the grace of God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, we do not need to be afraid of eternity. As we live and will live eternally in the promise of the Redeemer who gave his life for us.

So let's listen to that Easter story again. This is the story of Easter told by the Apostle John:

Early on Sunday morning, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb. She found that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance. She ran and found Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved [the one who gave us this story]. She said, "They have taken the Lord's body out of the tomb and we don't know where they have put him!" Peter and the other disciple started out for the tomb. They were both running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He stooped and looked inside and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he didn't go in. Then Simon Peter arrived and went inside. He also noticed the linen wrappings lying there, while the cloth that covered Jesus' head was folded up and lying apart from the other wrappings. Then the disciple who had reached the tomb first also went in and he saw and believed – for until then they still hadn't understood the Scriptures that said Jesus must rise from the dead. Then they went home. (John 20:1-10)

But the story continues:

Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. She saw two white-robed angels, one sitting at the head and the other at the foot of the place where the body of Jesus had been lying. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asked her. "Because they have taken away my Lord," she replied, "and I don't know where they have put him." She turned to leave and saw someone standing there. It was Jesus, but she didn't recognize him. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" Jesus asked her. "Who are you looking for?" She thought he was the gardener. "Sir," she said, "if you have taken him away, tell me where you have put him and I will go and get him." "Mary!" Jesus said. She turned him and cried out, "Rabboni!" (which is Hebrew for teacher). "Don't cling to me," Jesus said, "for I haven't yet ascended to the Father. But go find my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" Mary Magdalene found the disciples and told them, "I have seen the Lord!" Then she gave them his message.

The risen Christ Jesus letting Mary and his disciples know without a doubt that he had risen from the dead. He had swallowed up death forever. Hallelujah! That's an Easter story!

So what about Mark's gospel? What about that ending? Did Mark intend to end his gospel there? There are some people who suggest that, in fact, the last page of the manuscript somehow was lost and that Mark did not intend it there. Clearly, others also have been troubled by this ending of Mark, because we have in our Bibles two alternative endings. They couldn't leave it lie. They couldn't leave it there. They added some additional words. Many scholars actually believe that Mark was the first gospel

that was written, so we have three other Gospels. Is it possible that at least some part of the motivation to the others who wrote the other three gospels was because this ending didn't work for them either? They wanted to tell the story of Jesus and his resurrection in a new way, in a way that might connect more with their audience, with their people.

Well, to be honest, I often give up on speculating of what might have been and instead, I want to ask the question what is? If this is the end to Mark's gospel, how do we respond to this good news? What am I motivated to do with it? Before I tell you, let me also say that it is clear from the other testimonies that the first witnesses of the Resurrection, these women, at some point overcome their fears. Because we hear about their experiences told to us in the other gospels.

So what about us? Are we sometimes hesitant to share the gospel, to share the truth of Jesus' death and resurrection for the forgiveness of our sins with others? Are we afraid of what they will think of us? Are we afraid that they won't believe that we believe the story, or that they simply will call us radicals, or will somehow otherwise be offended or dismiss us? Do we not speak out of fear?

I almost want to say that I think Mark intentionally ends his gospel here. He wants to get a reaction. He wants the reaction to be "Not me. I won't be too afraid to share!" Maybe he was successful. Maybe the other apostles wrote the Gospels because they wanted to say "we aren't too afraid. We will stand firm in this truth that Christ died for us and that God raised him from the dead, and that death is no more, that our eternity is secure in Jesus."

In fact, the whole Christian church on Earth is the result of those who have been willing to tell the gospel story, to tell the truth of what has been done for us. And so, as we celebrate this Easter, we celebrate out loud. We celebrate so that others too can know that God's love and forgiveness are available to him. Jesus was victorious over sin and death. He's victorious over our fear. He tells us that we do not need to be afraid. So while I may sometimes worry about what others think of me, I am forgiven. All who put their trust in Jesus are forgiven. I too, by the promise of God, have victory over death and the grave. My eternity and your eternity and the eternity of everyone who believes in Jesus is secure. So we have hope. So I will not fear. I will proclaim. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Love lives again. Call us back to life again.