

**April 12, 2020**

**Easter**

**Mark 16: 1-8**

**Prayer:** Dear Lord, we have experienced Easter in times of terrorism, mass shootings and war. But this is our first in the face of a global pandemic. Please give us the courage and compassion, the boldness and love we need to survive it and to emerge more compassionate followers of Christ. In the name of the one who was resurrected, we pray. Amen.

### **Love in the Time of Coronavirus**

Anyone who worships with us regularly can tell you that Triune is not the easiest place in the world to preach.

I had to interrupt one service because a man was burping loudly in the front row. When I asked him to stop, he argued with me.

One woman hit the drums every time she walked to the rest room.

Very recently a man threaded his way through singers and musicians right back here to get to the restroom. I have no idea why.

Who knew I'd long for those days?

When it occurred to me on March 16 that churches all over the world might be shuttered for Easter Sunday, I was undone.

Not only is it usually the most glorious worship service of the year, when we need two services to accommodate the crowds. But also it would be my last Easter in this place. I had announced my intention to retire this summer.

What is it T.S. Eliot wrote?

*This is the way the world ends*

*Not with a bang but with a whimper.*

I wouldn't hear Andy's visiting brass section.

Wouldn't hear the choir in its newly refurbished choir loft.

Wouldn't see fresh flowers on the cross out front.

Wouldn't hug all those precious people as they exited the sanctuary at noon.

I gotta tell you: I was feeling pretty sorry for myself.

But the truth is, the current state of the world – hiding, isolating, fearful – is probably more like that first Easter than the grand Easter pageants we have created.

That's why I have chosen Mark's rendering of the resurrection story for this morning. His is our most subdued resurrection story. To put it mildly.

If you have your Bible handy, take a look at Mark 16. After verse 8, your Bible probably has some more verses, marked with the words "the shorter ending of Mark" and "the longer ending of Mark" or words to that effect.

But those additional segments are not found in the earliest manuscripts of Mark's gospel. Mark's was the earliest gospel written,

just a few decades after Jesus' death. And all of the oldest Greek manuscripts end at verse 8.

We think that Christians in later centuries came along and looked at Mark's gospel and said, "My gosh, how depressing! We've got to do better than that." And they added some verses about the resurrection and post-resurrection appearances and the ascension pulled from the other gospels.

But the original writer Mark ended his gospel on a much more somber note. He ended it the same way he wrote it all the way through – of a lonely, misunderstood Jesus surrounded by fickle, broken humans. Let's read together this original ending in **Mark 16: 1-8**.

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.

See how this story ends? In terror and amazement and fear. And in silence.

Mark knows, of course, that Jesus has been resurrected. The "young man" or angel in the tomb tells the women so.

But the story ends with the women and the disciples still in turmoil. Despite the resurrection, they still inhabited a fierce and frightening world.

Just like Mark's readers. And just like us, trying to find hope, trying to define love in the time of coronavirus. (With apologies to Gabriel Garcia Marquez.)

This ending is such a fitting conclusion to Mark's gospel, for he wrote about a Jesus who was misunderstood, abandoned and forsaken from beginning to end.

He wrote of disciples who were too confused and blind to be loyal.

He wrote of a crucifixion so lonely that the dying man cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

He wrote of a stranger, a centurion, who was the only one at the cross to recognize, "Truly this man was God's Son!"

And so here at the very end, Mark wrote of visitors to Jesus' tomb too frightened to share the message of his resurrection. He wrote a story of a Savior surrounded by broken, bewildered, frightened humans.

*Just like us.*

Matthew, Luke and John tell us that Mary Magdalene and the women at the tomb ran and told the disciples about the resurrected Jesus, and from all that subsequently happened, we know that must be true.

But Mark lets us know that the telling might not have been quite so quick, quite so immediate, quite so fearless.

**“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.”**

There is a wonderful story about the day that Great Britain's Duke of Wellington met Napoleon at Waterloo. Arrangements were made to

send news of the battle from one ship to another by semaphore – or signal flags – across the English Channel.

A group of men stood on the shore of England, anxiously awaiting word. And the flags signaled the message, letter by letter, “Wellington defeated ...”

Then a bank of fog rolled in, cutting off the men’s view of the closest ship. *Was that it? The fall of Great Britain?*

After a wait that seemed interminable, the fog cleared and the full message became clear, “Wellington defeated ... Napoleon!”

That is what is happening here in Mark. We’ve got the first part of the message – but we don’t know what it means yet. The young man dressed in a white robe – probably meant to be recognized as an angel – clearly announces that Jesus has been raised. *But so what?* It’s not obvious what that means for us.

That won’t become clear for awhile.

The angel tells the faithful women, **“(G)o, 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) they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”**

At that point in their lives, they felt terror. At that point in their lives, they felt forsaken.

Is that not exactly what many of us are facing in the time of coronavirus?

My friend Paulette Dunn took over as director of Project Host Soup Kitchen in November. So right as she is trying to learn her job, she is faced with adapting it to accommodate social distancing.

Lizzie Bebber took over as United Ministries’ new director on Monday. She’s trying to learn a new job and a new city and new school system for her children while all three systems are crippled.

Alone in our offices and in our homes, many of us feel abandoned, forsaken, at loose ends. We’re not entirely sure we’re doing all that we

should be doing. We're not entirely sure we're avoiding all that we should be avoiding.

We are quite possibly getting a taste of what that first Easter was like for Jesus's followers, hiding out in their homes, questioning life as they'd known it. Like them, we wonder if we'll ever be able to live as we lived before – worshiping in filled sanctuaries, gathering for outdoor concerts, traveling freely across state and national borders.

I've got to believe that we are offered hope in the same way those Christians who revised Mark's gospel offered hope. They knew there was more to the story. We know there will be more to our story.

For as much as I love Mark's starkness and honesty, he is not the final word in our salvation story.

*Tell the disciples to go to Galilee,* the angel instructed the women at the tomb. *Jesus would meet them in Galilee.*

Galilee was the place of the Gentiles, an unclean place as far as the Jewish disciples were concerned. But sure enough, that is what

Jesus had in mind – to return to Galilee of the Gentiles to spread the news of the resurrection of a Savior, to spread the news that everyone, even Gentiles, were welcome in the kingdom of God.

And as Paul Harvey would say, therein lies the rest of the story.

The last time we saw Peter he was denying Jesus three times on the night of his arrest. But in the book of Acts, we see him getting a second wind.

Peter actually traveled to Galilee after receiving a vision, and he met up with the Roman centurion Cornelius. He preached a powerful sermon, acknowledging that Jesus was sent to save the Gentiles as surely as he was sent to save Peter's fellow Jews.

It was a little late, but Peter eventually met up with Jesus in Galilee.

The women may have initially fled in terror and amazement, as Mark concludes, but they eventually told the disciples he was risen.

They had to or the Word would not have spread to Galilee – or to Jerusalem or to all Judea and Samaria, or to the ends of the earth.

Like Peter, like the women at the tomb, we may be paralyzed right now. It is very easy to get things wrong and have to go back and regroup, re-assess. At Triune, we have changed our hours and tweaked our work every single week for the past month.

I would caution everyone to watch out for those politicians, those news agencies, who said one thing, then pivoted and said the complete opposite without acknowledging any mistake, any misstatement.

There is no shame in making a mistake in these confusing times. There is great shame in lying about it to save face.

I can picture those early disciples, huddled in fear in their homes on that first Easter, wondering how their beloved rabbi could be dead, fearing that the Romans might come for them next. But then they walked out into a world reconfigured by that rabbi's resurrection.

What will our world look like when we are able to walk forth? I hope it looks kinder, calmer, more beautiful. I hope we will have learned something about priorities, about patience, about whom to trust, and whom to distrust.

What the resurrection tells us, what Peter's turnaround tells us, is we will have a chance to take up life again.

We will have a chance to face down the terror those women felt at the tomb and to step into the light and the confidence of the resurrection.

We will have a chance to go on, finally, to our Galilee.

Amen.