

Pastor Steve's Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

Please find below the text on which I preached, and the sermon to follow. Blessings to you!

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

SERMON

At the outset of the Lenten season no one would have expected that this is how we would celebrate the defeat of death in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is unexpected. Celebrating the resurrection has a different look and feel to it. When I exclaim, "He is risen!", there is not a resounding response of, "He is risen Indeed!" The sanctuary is not pungent with the smell of Easter lilies. The pews are not packed. The voice and bell choirs will not be singing or playing for us. It is a quieter Resurrection Sunday. It is surely different. Some of you might be thinking to yourself, *Pastor Steve, "different" is not the word I would use. How about disappointing, or sad?* Sure, it can be that as well. We are in good company, because Mark's account of the resurrection leaves us wanting more as well. The Gospel of Mark ends with the word *fear*. Not a word we associate with Good News. In Mark, there are no resurrection appearances, there is no final commissioning of the disciples to go and make disciples, there is only silence, confusion, and fear.

Three times Jesus told his disciples about his suffering, rejection, death and rising from the dead. And now that the tomb is empty, and a young man saying to meet Jesus in Galilee as he told you, one would expect the Mary's, and

Salome to be making a mad dash of joy and anticipation to share the great news with the rest of the disciple crew. And why is it these three women are the main characters? Where are the insiders, Peter, James and John? Remember back to the transfiguration when Jesus told them they could speak of his mission, divinity and glory after Jesus is back from the dead? Well, he's back, and they are nowhere to be found. How does this story get told? How will the story of God's intense love for creation, of death on the cross, capped by the once thought impossible act of resurrection be passed on? Mark's version of the resurrection has all the elements of being a great big let-down. But only if we let this day and age finish the story.

Three women come to prepare Jesus body for burial. Their concern is the stone blocking the tomb entrance. Upon getting there, the stone is rolled away. Inside the tomb they find a young man who tells them to not be alarmed, and he proceeds to tell them what they already know...*he was crucified, he has been raised. Look, he is not here. He will meet you in Galilee, just as he told you. Go tell Peter.*

Again, instead of joy and excitement, they are seized by terror and amazement (Greek...terror-trembling/quaking, amazement-a displacement of one's mind).

Now, there are 11 more verses to the Gospel of Mark whose authentic link to the original author is largely debated. Within those eleven verses are the resurrection appearances, the commissioning of the disciples and...a couple verses on drinking poisonous liquids and handling poisonous snakes that have arguably done more harm than good through the ages. So we get the rest of the story we want and then some. But those verse don't fit. It's a forced completion of what was started. Sometimes an ending that we don't link gives us the space and ability to live into the story, add to it, correct it, help it carry on. Be left to think and carry out is ok.

But isn't that only human, only natural for us to want this abruptly ended Gospel to have a happy and hope-filled ending? At the end of any good story we want to hear good news. We want to hear of transformed characters, rags to riches, broken to whole, the lost is found, the crooked are made straight, voice is given to the voiceless, and justice is realized for the oppressed. Throughout the course of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had a hand in scenarios such as those. And now the stage has been set for the disciples of bumbling faith to step into hearts minds and souls of resolute faith, and proclaim the victory of the good and greatness of God over death, because the tomb is empty! But that is not the

Word of God, in Jesus through the lens of Mark. Mark is real. And I believe Mark's version of the Gospel is just what we all need today.

Again, this is not the way we anticipated the spring of 2020, living, learning, shopping, working and churching from home. Relationships at a distance. 6 feet of separation. What was to be for each of us and our families has been put on hold indefinitely, or possibly scuttled altogether. Life is like in some sort of suspended animation. How often have you stopped like I have and said something to the effect of, *How is this so? What is going on? When will it end? Am I safe? Are my loved ones safe? When will I see them again?* Have you entertained the question of what will "normal" look like? Or even wondered if this is the "new normal"? And then we are quick to wash over it with a *this too will pass...* But pass to what?! Dashed aspirations, plans that plummeted, floundering finances, premature deaths, and worry and concern for each other is what we share these days. And this doesn't even account for all the other loose ends...the shoulda-coulda-wouldas of our lives...words not yet spoken, relationships without closure, missed opportunities, sorry's not said, forgiveness not given. So much of life is unfinished and uncertain. And so too was the uncertainty for those

three women whose biggest concern was a practical one...*how are we going to move that stone?*

It was three days out from Jesus death. Had they forgotten about the three days later risen from the dead promise? Was that even on their mind? What was on their mind was...*We need to prepare Jesus body for burial and hopefully someone is there to help us with the stone.* Their leader, their teacher, the friend they loved was dead, and there was business to be taken care of. Period. Their world was upside down, living in a kind of suspended animation. Wondering what is next was on their mind. Life goes on. And that is just what Jesus promised. Life will go on, even if it is not what we expect or want.

Everything Jesus said came to be. So why then would it make any sense for His life's legacy to end with him lying in a tomb, a body waiting to be placed in the ground like any other mortal human?! He was, betrayed by Judas, denied three times by Peter, and everyone else scatters. Just like he said. Life will go on. The tomb is empty. Now what? Like a good cliff-hanger we are left wanting more. The last scene of Mark's gospel has the Mary's and Salome fleeing in fear and silence. Has it all finally clicked, and they don't know what to say or do? Has their short-sighted faith, doubt and uncertainty been rolled away along with the stone? Has faith

taken root at the sight of an empty tomb and a reminding word?

Writer, philosopher and professor Mark Nepo writes, “all buried seeds crack open in the dark the instant they surrender to a process they can’t see.” (repeat) In seminary when buried under books, and the pressures of self-doubt and fear of failure we students were reminded to “trust the process”. When buried under a mountain of debt, and are working out a plan we are told to “trust the process”. When you and your spouse are struggling in all things, and you go to therapy, you are told to dig in and, “trust the process” of working together. If you have children, you wipe their behind, and mouths, educate them, love and kiss them repeatedly, and then turn them out to the world, “trusting the process”. In life we make friends, build bridges, and lose friends and burn bridges, “trusting a process”. And we can’t always see the entirety of processes. Trust involves our ability to let go, and let God work it out. Not in an ambivalent, “It is what it is, I’m at the mercy of the cosmos kind of way”, but in an unexplainable surrender that permits us to move forward in life under any and all circumstances knowing that God provides, comforts and guides.

We are literally taking life day by day. Uncertainty, confusion and fear was the scene the morning of the

resurrection, it is today, will be tomorrow, next week, a month, for years, and so on. We don't have all the answers, but we do have is a factual account, not a story, with an awkward, short on details, and less than desirable ending, that is actually loaded with promise! The moment the stone was rolled away, the momentum of hope materialized and refused to stop. And with that hope came the promise that Jesus would meet his disciples in Galilee, meet us in our life's journey, and gather up the faithful when He comes again. God's process of redeeming us, restoring us, and releasing us to live into the truths of an ongoing love story for us continues. God's story, Jesus story, the disciples story...our story.

Do not be alarmed good people. This too shall pass. The anxiety and uncertainty of today will pass, and we will be different. Already are. And I can't help but wonder how we will encounter one another when this passes. There is a momentum to God's presence. Stones are rolling away. God is doing a new thing. Do you sense it too? The fear of not being able to see, or sense a definitive end to the death and sadness is not easy. But, I repeat for you, just as the young man in the tomb said. He is risen! The momentum of God's conquer over sin and death began at the empty tomb and continues this morning. The momentum of God's love is on

the move! The hope of the risen Christ materializes around you! May the events of your life, good, bad, and everything in between, be nurtured by the processes of God's love for you. Love that briefly surrendered on a cross, and couldn't not be quarantined within the walls of a tomb. Amen.