**Writing The Resurrection Chapter of Your Life**Mark 16:1-8.

Easter begins in the stillness and quiet of the darkness before the dawn. Then the birds began to awaken and begin their song. Then the women came to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body. But the angels were already there.

Each of the gospel writers tell the Easter story differently. How could it be any other way? They wrote 40-60 years after the event. And how do you begin to grasp the momentous, once and forever, mystery of Easter?

The gospel writers all have an empty tomb, but who were the dazzling messengers? Were there one or two, were they men or angels? They all have the women as the first witnesses, Mary Madelene in all the tellings.

I

Matthew’s telling has a detail the others don’t, and it is completely important for us today. There were Roman soldiers guarding the tomb to make sure no seditious mischief might happen. When an angel of the Lord appeared and was sitting on the stone clothed in lightning, Matthew records: “the guards shook and became like dead men.” The empire had put Jesus to death, but something greater than the Empire happened! They lie as dead, but Jesus is alive! This is a crucial truth for today and the delusions of the American Empire.

John’s Easter gospel features Mary Magdalene. She had come weeping to the tomb. With courage only love can bring, she entered right into the dark tomb. Two angels were there sitting where Jesus had been lying. “Why are you weeping”, they ask. She replies, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him!” It was all she could imagine. Then Jesus appeared. She supposed him to be the gardener. Until, he called her name. “Mary”, he said. There is something unmistakable about the way people who love us call our names. Then she answered, “My dear Rabbi!”. Then she, the first evangelist of Easter, went to tell the disciples. It is the most intimate of all the Easter encounters.

John is not finished. In his second ending to the gospel—chapter 21– he tells of Jesus’ resurrection appearance to the disciples. They had gone back to Galilee and gone back to fishing. Jesus showed up incognito, like a curious vacationer. “Boys, caught anything?” They yelled back, “Not a one, and we’ve been fishing all night!” Then Jesus said, “Cast your nets on the other side of the boat.” They’d heard that voice before, and those words. The beloved disciple shouted, “It is the Lord!” And Peter didn’t wait for the boat. He jumped overboard and thrashed his way to shore.

In Luke’s Easter story the angels say with delicious irony, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Was there a twinkle in their eyes? (There was in Janice’s as she read this text last week.) Did they wink? Does God ever wink? Carved into the stone facade of the Cathedral of Reims in France are two great angels. They have the most wonderful smiles on their faces, smiles which cast a benediction over the city, smiles with a hint of mischief, as if they know something we don’t — and can’t wait for us to find it out.

Do you remember the famous funeral scene in Mark Twain’s Tom Sawyer? Tom, Huck Finn and Joe Harper had set off on a raft trip down the Mississippi to be pirates. They had gotten lost, and after a while the town assumed they were dead.

So the town had a funeral service for the three boys at church as part of the Sunday worship. The preacher talked about the boys in such winning ways that the people began to feel pangs of guilt that they hadn’t seen such good in the boys while they were still alive. Everyone was sobbing in their grief.

There was a rustle in the back balcony and the sound of feet clattering down the stairs. Then the back door crept open and down the aisle came the three boys who had been hiding in the balcony and watching their own funeral service! The minister shouted, “Praise God from whom all blessings flow! Sing it everybody!” And all the church burst into song, singing as never before.

Do you remember the story— we readers knowing the boys were alive, everybody else thinking they were dead. It’s like we were up in the balcony with the boys watching the funeral service with them.

This moment in Luke is like this, we up in the balcony with Jesus watching his funeral in progress, only he’s not dead! As the women come to anoint his body, Jesus punches us in the ribs and says, “You’re going to love this part!” It is the glad surprise of Easter, the gladdest the world had ever known.

II

And today we come to Mark’s Easter gospel, and it has the most curious, disconcerting ending. The Easter story in Mark is much like the others, the empty tomb, the women coming with spices to anoint his body, the angel telling them the amazing news and commissioning them to go tell the disciples, but then it closes with verse 8, the last verse of the earliest manuscripts of Mark’s gospel:

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.

What a way to end a gospel! Or was it the original end? And for all you grammar nerds out there, the Greek manuscript ends with a preposition! “gar” in the Greek, or “for”. So the last words of the gospel: “And they said nothing to anyone, for.” Any grammar teacher would put a red circle around that “for”.

So is Mark the Unfinished Gospel, like Schubert’s “Unfinished Symphony”? Did Mark mean to end it that way? Or, was the original ending broken off and lost? Ancient scrolls often had beginnings or endings broken off because they were the parts which got the most wear and tear.

Most of us grew up with Bibles that ended with 12 more verses, 9-20, added by the early church. Newer translations put these verses in parenthesis at the bottom of the page. The early church was understandably nervous about such an incomplete ending and added the extra verses, a kind of Reader’s Digest Condensed version of what the other gospels included, a Cliff Notes version. A summary of Resurrection appearances and that odd verse about handling snakes in worship! (That’s where snake-handling Baptist churches get their biblical warrant.)

So we have here a literary mystery. All the other gospels have a Part A and a Part B. Part A has the empty tomb, the women coming with spices and the angels’ announcement, “He is risen!”, then the charge, “Go tell!” Part B contains all the resurrection appearances to the women, disciples and followers—each very different and described in different ways from person to person. All time and space seems to have been suspended. He seems to appear somewhere everywhere at once! The mystery of the Resurrection is elusive, as the mystery of God-happenings always are.

And yet, we would have no Easter faith without Part B, the appearances to Mary, the women, the disciples, to Jesus’ brother, James who only then became a disciple. (It would have been hard to grow up with Jesus as your brother!) And of course to Paul in a blinding vision in the sky. We would not be here today if we only had Part A.

Did Mark intend to end his gospel with Part A? Did some professor at the University of Jerusalem snip off the ending because, of course, such things as Resurrection appearances could not happen!?

III

But here is where a literary mystery turns into an invitation, and here is where my sermon has been heading: “Writing the Resurrection Chapter of Your Life!” You get to write your own personal ending to Mark’s gospel, your own resurrection chapter. It may have begun, or it may yet begin. Or, it may be a work in progress. Sue, at first heard the title: “Riding the Resurrection Chapter and Your Life.” Like riding a horse, the horse of God! You may think you have this magnificent animal under your control, then it takes off and you are hanging on for dear life—or a dearer life! It can be like that.

Stanley Kunitz wrote a poem about looking over the long years of his life, with all its joy and loss. Here is the ending:

Though I lack the art

to decider it,

no doubt the next chapter

in my book of transformations

is already written.

I am not done with my changes.

God is not done with your life. Even now God is on the way to help you write the resurrection chapter of your life. What might it look like? Don’t be surprised if changes are in store.

Don’t be discouraged or misled by famous stories of people who’ve met the risen Christ and had their lives transformed on the spot, just like that! Christ comes in so many ways, often incognito. And in ways unique to each one of us. Paul writes of our life in Christ that as we gaze upon him and follow his way we are being changed “degree by degree “into his likeness. And often we cannot see it.

California novelist Anne Lamott experienced Christ not as “hound of heaven,” as one had described him, but as “the alley cat of heaven” who kept mewling at her door until she finally let him in. “OK, you can come in”, she said, and her writings have inspired and encouraged thousands. William Carey, a British cobbler of shoes answered God’s call to go to be a missionary in India he began the modern missionary movement he took a ship to get there. On day, standing on the deck, he took off his hairpiece and threw it into the ocean! I’m not sure why that moves me, but it does.

A man came to his therapist and said, “I’ve lost my laugh. I can only copy other people’s laughs, but it’s not mine and I don’t know where to find it. He found it as he began to volunteer regularly at a homeless shelter. His resurrection began among the poor and the recovery of laughter, his own.

Today at our baptism of Janna Brown and Emma Wegmiller you will hear their stories. We heard some of Tom’s last week. All ours are different because God comes as we each need for God to come. Your resurrection story is your story, not somebody else’s. There are no carbon copy people and no carbon copy Christians. You can’t go to ChatGPT and let artificial intelligence write your story for you. Only you, alongside the supreme intelligence of the Universe. What an adventure!

For some the resurrection chapter is about compassionate action! For some, a new awareness of Christ, for some, getting out there to change the world as God wants it changed for our sake and the world’s. For some, here comes the poet, here comes the quiet solitude with God, here comes the inner life changing you for the good. God is about TODAY! And you LIVING with all your heart and mind and soul and strength! What stone needs rolling away for you to live like that? That’s the ongoing miracle of Easter.

Part B of your Easter story is right around the corner. The angels said, “Why do you seek the living among the dead?” Wendell Berry writes in one of his *Sabbaths* poems:

The question before me, now that I

am old, is not how to be dead,

which I know from enough practice,

but how to be alive….

So, “Practice resurrection!”, to use his words again, and start writing the resurrection chapter of your life!