

Hope for All Creation

sermon digest

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Mark 16:1-8

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Perhaps you thought you had picked up the wrong order of service or that we had slipped up in putting the service together and failed to change the Gospel reading. The second Sunday of Easter is called "low Sunday," as if all of the festivities of Easter are over; but here we are on the third Sunday of Easter reading about the women's visit to the tomb. Did the reading surprise you? Even jar you? Did it somehow seem out of place? Can the story of the empty tomb stand on its own, apart from the usual hallelujahs and bright celebration of Easter Sunday morning?

Traditionally, the church sets aside not just one but fifty days to celebrate Easter. More to the point, the crucial importance of Easter and the Resurrection to the church's very identity is symbolized in our gathering every Sunday morning to celebrate little Easters in remembrance of the Gospels' announcement that Jesus was raised from the dead on the first day of the week. Did you know that the forty days of Lent, stretching from Ash Wednesday to Easter, exclude Sundays from their somber count for that reason?

Our choice of Mark's Easter story doesn't help much either, for Mark sort of leaves the story hanging mid air. Did you notice the last words that were read this morning? "So they [the women] went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Terror, fear and indecision are not very triumphant notes on which to end a story, particularly a story that is so critical to our very existence. Even more, it is a strange way to end a book. If your Bible is a translation from the last half century, you may find that the seeming continuation of the story in verses nine through 20 are printed in fine print in a footnote (the Revised Standard Version of 1946) or are printed under separate headings as "The Shorter Ending of Mark" and "The Longer Ending" (the New Revised Version of 1989). Despite the high levels of discomfort it engenders, the absence of verses beyond verse eight in the oldest and best manuscripts lead most students of Mark to conclude that either it ended there or the original conclusion has been lost.

New Testament scholar Don Juel shares the story of a student that was so taken with the Gospel of Mark that he decided to memorize it for public performances. For several years, the student poured over everything he could learn about the book. Finally, he was ready. Standing before the altar in a large church, he rendered an impeccable performance, coming at last to the closing words: "They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The audience, which had been with him every step of the way, sat in silence, waiting in breathless anticipation as if to say, "Yes, yes. Go on." Uncertain where to go next to bring the recitation to conclusion, the student shifted nervously from foot to foot, finally pronouncing a final "Amen." The crowd broke into thunderous applause.

The student later confessed to his teacher that he had felt the same sense of dis-ease the scribal editors of the text must have experienced centuries before, leading them to insert some sort of conclusion to the seemingly dangling, inconclusive ending. By the next performance, however, the student was ready. He uttered the final words, paused for a few dramatic moments and then turned and made his exit. There was no applause. The audience sat stunned, finally leaving the building in a buzz over being left in mid air.

Perhaps, then, it is good that we have fifty days to digest Easter before we proceed into Pentecost. Perhaps, too, it is good that every Sunday is a little Easter in which we have an opportunity to step back and reflect upon Easter's deep significance. Perhaps we would even do better if on Easter Sunday morning our music and our hallelujahs were a little less triumphant and more reflective. Rather than waiting until the letdown of low Sunday, perhaps we would do well to ask, "What now?" In the face of this word that birthed Christ's church, speaking hope in the middle of this world in which we live, what now? What do we do? And who should we be? And for what driving purpose do we now live our lives?

Easter is a commissioning. Perhaps Mark himself gives us some pointers. Going with the indicators that these words may well have his original conclusion, what is Mark saying? He does affirm the good news: "[Jesus] has been raised," but he does not stop there. "Go, tell." A familiar word in the church. We have heard it many times. We are responsible for telling and living the good news. But Mark continues: "He is going ahead of you to Galilee." Why Galilee? Earlier Mark noted that Jesus had gone "ahead of" his disciples toward Jerusalem and the Cross. Why would Jesus now want to meet them in Galilee? Why not meet them at the palace? Or the Temple? Why not confront the powers that had condemned him to death with incontrovertible proof who he was and the grievous nature of their error?

Why Galilee? Why that forlorn, out of the way place that people loved to ridicule? Remember the sneer directed toward Jesus himself: "Can anything good come out of Galilee?" Jesus was from Galilee and spent all but the closing days of his ministry there. All of the disciples seem to have been from Galilee. It was in Galilee that they responded to his call, sat under his teaching and walked alongside him as he healed the sick and extended welcome to those who had not previously known the meaning of inclusion and welcome. Could it be that Jesus was calling the disciples back to the place where their hopes had first been born? Could it be that he was calling them back to the place where he had begun and lived out his own mission so that in those intensive final days in his presence, they might be reminded of the nature of his mission and therefore their mission?

Why Galilee? Mark tells us that in his own ministry, Jesus specifically rejected utilizing the lure of the spectacular or of playing up to the powers that be. The resurrected Lord was not about to change his strategy. He would not go to Jerusalem to provide irrefutable proof to those same powers he had earlier refused to appease. His only “proof” would be the evidence of the faithful he would commission to take up his cause. That the ragtag band of fearful disciples he commissioned in Galilee could speak and live with convincing, power, changing and healing the lives of many, was the only evidence and the best evidence he left. It still is.

Easter speaks of hope for all creation. This year, the Week of the Young Child and the celebration of Earth Day converged into the second week of Easter. Last Sunday’s “As you go” in our order of service, focused on the needs of quality care and education for children in a day when 59% of mothers with infants and 74% of those with school-aged children work outside the home. This Sunday’s “As you go” focuses upon Earth Sabbath and the privilege and responsibility we share with other faith traditions to work for the protection and healing of God’s good earth. Concern for children and the earth are consistent with, not contrary to or outside of the hope we know in Christ.

Will Willimon observes that Easter did not take place on the last day of the week, the Jewish sabbath, but on the first day of the Jewish work week. “Isn’t that curious?” Willimon asks. Could it be that the choice of days indicates something fundamental about the nature of the hope to which we are called? Could it be that therein lies recognition that Easter is only the beginning point of faith, not its end?

The church through the centuries has broken fellowship and spilled blood in its insistence that we use just the right words in speaking of the Resurrection of Christ. Too often, however, our concern for *orthodoxy* has precluded our attention to *orthopraxy*. We who have encountered hope in Christ, however we might interpret that hope in our choice of words, are set on a trajectory of encountering the incompleteness of our world in the same spirit of the Christ who has gone before us. Far from just an inner peace that gives us rest from the realities of the world, the hope of Christ embraces the whole world. As Jurgen Moltmann puts it, “Those who hope in Christ can no longer put up with reality as it is, but begin to suffer under it, to contradict it” [*Theology of Hope*, 21]. Every indication of suffering and pain in our world becomes for us a call to mission, a call to engagement—and yes, a call to get to work.

Our celebration of Easter is not about business as usual nor maintaining things the way they are and always have been. Our celebration of Easter is the celebration of hope for all of creation. It is about looking despair in the face and committing the very stuff of our lives to bringing those hopes to reality.

So, hear the good news: Christ is risen from the dead!

What now?