

**April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
Easter Sunday**

**Mark 16:1-8 “Hope Will Rise Again”**

Christ is risen. (He is risen indeed.) Today is Easter, the high holy day of the Christian Faith. A lot of folks in the church, myself included, like to call it Resurrection Day. And I like this because resurrection is the beginning of something new. That’s why I’ve kept the butterfly on the table throughout Lenten season and for today. It is a reminder that wonderful new things can emerge from the old. That sounds like good news during a year where staying at home became the new “same old same old.” Something new happened this past week. We went from Red Tier, “Substantial” to Orange Tier “Moderate” as far as Butte County’s COVID infections and restrictions go. That means that we are now able to have 50% of our seating capacity for live worship in the sanctuary. Just in time for Easter too! Last week we could have 25% and we weren’t that far from reaching that number. But here we are! This isn’t the first time we’ve been in the Orange Zone though. I think we were there for a week or two last summer and another week or two in October before we quickly got bumped back up to Purple both times. I hope that doesn’t happen again. I’m very happy to see that folks are still taking precautions even though many of us have been vaccinated. I mentioned last week that Pastor Ted from First Christian Church in Sacramento warned us that there’s an upside and a downside to being able to meet live. The upside is that we are here. The downside is that we still have restrictions in place. I think we did a pretty good job last week, and I’m confident that we will continue to meet the challenges. We’ve got a ways to go. We’ve got to work some kinks out of how to make sure that people in the sanctuary and people in our virtual space can hear clearly and experience worship in the same way. We’re getting there, but it will be awkward for awhile. We’ve got a few more wires to run and a few more things to connect and a few more volunteers to train, but we will get there soon. Hang in there. We are entering into something new, and hope will rise again.

We spent some time in John's Gospel this morning at Sunrise Service. This is the beauty of having four accounts of the resurrection. We have more than one to choose from. As far as the lectionary is concerned this year, it's a Gospel of Mark Easter. As many of you know, Mark is my favorite of the four gospels. It's the most straightforward one and, consequently, gives us the most abrupt ending. Now, I need to put on my Bible scholar hat here ... you too, because in the earliest manuscripts of Mark's gospel, the book ends with verse 8 which is where Mary ended the reading. If you're following along in your own Bible, you might notice that it goes on for another 11 verses. But you also might have a Bible that labels those last verses, "The Longer Ending of Mark." See, it wasn't until the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> century that we started seeing verses 9 – 20 show up in manuscripts. And honestly, I can see why people may have wanted to add those extra verses. If you end it where we left off in verse 8, it sounds like something's missing. But I want you all to get in your time machines today and go back to the first and second century and pretend that you are a part of the community that Mark addressed. Are you there yet? Good!

If you are a person in Mark's faith community that means you understand Greek. Now, it's possible that your *native* language might be Aramaic, or maybe Hebrew, but you understand Greek because that's the trade language in this region. It's the language of the marketplace. This is how everyone is able to speak to one another. Now, you think Mark sounds abrupt the way it was read, wait until you hear how it sounds if you're just transliterating the Greek. This is going to sound sort of backward or "Yoda-ish" but a lot of non-English languages do when you just transliterate. Here's our text literally word for word:

“And having gone out, they fled from the tomb. Had seized for them trembling and amazement and to none, nothing they spoke. They were afraid, for ...”

Now, I'm sure you've had English teachers and grammar nerds tell you that you never end a sentence with a preposition. Of course, we do

anyway, especially in some geographic regions. In Virginia, I heard a *lot* of sentences end in prepositions. The most common is, “Where y’all from?” And if you wanted to be called an uppity Yankee, you’d say, “From a place that doesn’t end sentences with prepositions.” But here we are in Mark’s gospel where the sentence ends with a *conjunction*! That’s a *big* no-no. It makes it sound like you’re ending in the middle of a sentence. “For?!” For *what*? What’s the rest of the story? No *wonder* later editors tacked on those other 11 verses! There’s *got* to be something *more*, right? Yeah. There is. And that’s the beauty of Mark’s gospel. There *is* more, but in Mark’s case, only the reader or listener can bring closure.

Sound crazy? Lamar Williamson in his commentary on Mark’s Gospel writes, “When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb, and when a gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.” Rev. Dr. Emerson B. Powery, professor of Biblical Studies at Messiah College addresses Mark’s abrupt ending as an African American man. He says, “As descendants of the enslaved, we, too, understand how some stories do not ‘end’ with simplistic conclusions as if things were ‘happily ever after.’”

We lose the need for Easter when things are wrapped up in a nice little package. If the responsibility is on the receiver to end the gospel, then we’ve got some work to do to transform this world. If the responsibility is on the receiver to end the gospel, we’ve got to own up to the things that are unfinished ... that are *not* transformed. That means we’ve got to do the difficult work of addressing racism. We’ve got to ask hard questions like, “How am I contributing to racial justice?” Or maybe the question needs to be, “How am I contributing to racial *injustice*? How is my silence on the matter perpetuating a racist system?”

If the responsibility of putting a period on the end of the gospel is on the receiver, then we also need to address how we’ve failed in caring for our fellow human beings, especially those who deal with mental illness or addiction or any of the other social maladies that we think are “yucky”

because we were fortunate enough to have the resources to keep us from getting completely submerged or buried.

If the responsibility of putting a conclusion on the gospel is up to us, we've got to come face to face with why we are so daggone violent! We've got to address why we're so polarized! We've got to look at ourselves in the mirror and ask, "Why can I not see God in my fellow human beings? Even the ones with whom I disagree? My words affirm that we are all made in the image of God, and yet I can't even look at some of my fellow human beings in the eye without thinking they're what's wrong with the world."

Easter is uncomfortable! Is it worth celebrating? Yes! Are we right to be filled with joy and respond to God's gift to us through Christ with hearty "Amens" and "He is risens?" Yes! As we have been taught and as we have affirmed, Jesus' betrayal and arrest was not the end of the story. As we have been taught and as we have affirmed, Jesus' trial and crucifixion was not the end of the story. As we have been taught and as we have affirmed, his death and the tomb was not the end of the story. But because we are putting on our "Mark" hats this morning, we have to consider that even the empty tomb ... even the resurrection is not the end of the story. The resurrection is an invitation to transformation, and transformation is rarely comfortable, and always ongoing.

Wow, you sure laid it on thick there pastor. Can't we just rejoice in the fact that we're meeting here in person after a year in COVID exile? Can't we just breathe and feel good about this for a sec? I mean, you already said that Easter is the high holy day of the Christian faith, can't we just revel in the good news of this story? Of course. Remember, though, the good news is not *just* about the story in the book, but the story which moves us to action. You are the end of the Gospel. You want to experience the resurrected Christ? Live as he lived, love as he loved, forgive as he forgave, and believe as he believed and you will experience Jesus.