

The Resurrection Flourish (Mark 16:1-8)

Welcome to Easter 2021! If this is your first time with us in worship today, we're glad you're here, and if you're in our immediate community, we hope to meet you in person very soon. We'll be rolling out some information about that starting next week. In the meantime, we're here to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus, the foundation of Christian faith and the highlight of our year. There's always joy surrounding this event as we remember it together. But curiously, that's the one feature missing from our text today.

Mark's description of it is the least spectacular of the gospel accounts. Characteristic of his style, Mark presents the facts as they occurred with little, if any, explanation or interpretation of them. He seems to let the event itself tell the story for the purpose of allowing the reader to experience the moment somewhat first-hand—a sort of “you are there” approach. It makes sense because it puts us in the same place as the early followers of Jesus who, like us, only heard what the women at the tomb saw—they had to draw conclusions about it on the basis of what was reported by those who were there. So, like them, let's unpack what we know remembering that this was Sunday, and Jesus had died by crucifixion on Friday afternoon.

In Kim's reading we heard that three women came to the tomb expecting to anoint Jesus' body—part of the burial ritual in that day. They were primarily concerned about how the stone covering the tomb's entrance could be rolled away so that they might gain entry. To their surprise, when they arrived, they found the stone already moved—on the one hand, problem solved. On the other hand, they might have wondered who had beat them to it and were they going to be deprived of their final act of devotion—the only thing left for them to do for the sake of the one they had loved.

Upon entering the tomb, they were alarmed to find someone they didn't know, who wasn't engaged in burial rituals, and the body of Jesus wasn't there. We can only imagine the range of possibilities that might have flooded their thought—as a point of interest, resurrection wasn't one of them for they didn't burst out in spontaneous praise. Clearly they didn't know what to make of this. I don't think we can fault them for this—we've likely had similar experiences where the reality of a moment doesn't match our expectations and we become alarmed. The shock of the moment prevents us from recalling what we might have heard before, or our emotion overwhelms us clouding thought. We're confused and disoriented. That's what happened with this trio as the man dressed in white—a hint of angelic presence—explains: what he says is vital.

1) “You're looking for Jesus, the Nazarene”—clearly naming the right person, this is not a case of mistaken identity. 2) “who was crucified”—verifying the circumstances of his death which they had witnessed. 3) “He is risen! He is not here”—the resurrection has occurred, and he is not here, that is, among the dead. It caught my attention that the man says, “he” rather than his body is not here, using words commonly associated with living persons. 4) “see the place where they laid him.”—IOW, verify for yourself, look around, nothing is being hidden here. Presumably the women have once again glanced at the scene, so the man continues. 5) “But go, tell his disciples and Peter...” So the women came with one purpose in mind, now they are sent out with a higher purpose—this is often the case in the life of faith, we come for one thing, or we come with our idea, and then find ourselves re-directed into a stream of reality, or acts of purpose that far exceed our initial approach. The women are to tell the disciples, meaning they've nothing to do with this situation as they're not even aware of it—they don't yet know what the women already do. But did you catch the last bit? Tell the disciples AND Peter—why the distinction? Isn't he part of the disciples? Yes and no. Yes from Christ's perspective, no from Peter's. This hints at Peter's state of mind, his sense that he had forfeited his place among the disciples for his denials of Jesus in the courtyard of the high priest on Thursday evening. The man affirms Peter's standing, though Peter himself doesn't. 6) “He (Jesus) is going ahead of you into Galilee...” This, to me, apart from the resurrection itself, is the most inspiring part of Mark's account. I want to focus on this shortly, so for the moment we'll simply say that the man shifts their focus from what has happened to what is yet to come. 7) “There you will see him, just as he told you.” IOW, if you would see him, go to where he is. There you

will find all the confirmation you need of what he told you ahead of time and of what you've seen here in this setting.

Now is when you expect to find joy arising in the text—when we read the account 2000 years later having understood what has transpired since then, joy finds us in this moment of reading. But the women have only lived with this knowledge for what, five minutes? How could they possibly process all of this new information against all the trauma they were still experiencing? And this isn't about gender—the disciples, all men—didn't do any better when the women finally did tell them what they saw. In fact, it was a shade worse, for the women were simply shocked and trying to process reality. Luke tells us that the disciples didn't believe the women—that ought to lay to rest the idea that this is an invented narrative concocted after the fact to make sense of an otherwise rotten ending. The heroes of the faith were anything but. Our text tells us the women fled from the tomb trembling and bewildered—a completely understandable response—their faith history didn't have a category for single resurrection before the end of time—they couldn't sort out what they had been told—no-one this side of heaven could at that moment. So, still trying to wrap their thought around this perplexing turn of events, the women fled, and according to Mark said nothing to anyone because they were afraid. Really, they must have thought: who would believe us? And, perhaps, do we believe it ourselves? Did we all just see the same thing?

And that's the end of the story in Mark—some of your versions may have additional verses, but they have been added later, they aren't original to Mark. Some believe the original was torn at this place, and lost to us—there must have been more, there has to be a happier ending than this? This is anti-climatic; we're left waiting for a big finish that never arrives. But the more I sit with this, I get the sense that this is the original ending, and it's purposeful, and I want to consider it with you, but not yet. Just hold that thought for a moment, because I want to go back to what the young man dressed in white said: Jesus has gone ahead of you into Galilee...

I love that! There's a boatload of hope in that statement. It's a game-changer where the focus shifts from what has happened to what is yet to come. This is the gospel in a nutshell—because of Christ's resurrection, we're not consigned to living in the past—the sorry history of human dysfunction trying to find meaning in a world disconnected from God, even the sorry history of our individual stories filled with regret or misgiving or euphemisms aside, just plain sin. The point of the gospel is not labored memory of a sinful past, but the liberated opportunity of a righteous future—and this not exclusively tied to an ethereal future, but to the immediate future in your present reality.

The early followers of Jesus came to realize that the death of Jesus on the cross meant the death of sin as the guiding principle and power of human life. On the basis of his love for us, Jesus stepped in front of us facing the onslaught of sin, absorbing in himself its unabated force and power, and by fulling containing it, he killed its power as it killed him. Sin's grip on humanity was all that Jesus left behind in the tomb. In its place, his life—both its quality and chronology—is now offered as the dynamic for life to all who will have it. Jesus has gone ahead and invites us to join him in resurrection power.

What if we lived in the confidence of that assurance? How would that change our approach to life right now? How much energy for life do we squander longing for what we had rather than on what is yet before us? How much power for accomplishment do we squander trying to bring about our sense of things instead of discovering where Jesus is at work and joining him there? It's interesting that through the man in white, Jesus pointed early followers to Galilee—why there? I think it's because that's where it all started for them in their journey with Jesus. It's where the first disciples lived and worked, and where they first answered the call to follow him. They heard him and saw the effects of his ministry among their friends and family, the members of their own community. And now, it would be their turn to continue that same work, among their neighbors and friends, doing for them in his power what he had done among them. Eventually the effect of that work would reach the ends of the earth. The resurrection marked a new beginning for the world. A new reality had arrived where the focus is not on what's been or what is, but on what can be in the grace of Christ. That holds true for us

in our day. The world may not be different as we place our trust in Christ, but we are different in it—and that makes all the difference for what we do in it. Jesus is ahead of us, preparing the way for us to be engaged in common life with uncommon power. And because he is alive, there will never be a place we go that Jesus isn't already there calling and equipping us to live his life in that place.

Which is exactly why Mark ends the way it does. It's like an unfinished symphony, where those who best know the composer provide the finishing movements consistent with the style of the composer. We know the composer—we know the manner of his life, we know his methods, his hope—we've been trained by him. Now it's up to us to fill in the movements that remain so that the symphony of his love resonates across the street and around the world throughout all of time until the final flourish sounds in eternity. AMEN