

Mark 16:1-8 – Unbelievable

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Alleluia! Today, we dress in our best springtime outfits and there are no notes of sadness, worry, grief, or fear in our greetings to one another this morning. But how different it was early on that first Easter morning as Mark tells us in today's gospel.

It felt a little like walking through water with heavy weights strapped to your hands and feet –a feeling of numbness that comes when one is emotionally exhausted.

The Sabbath, the day of rest and worship, was over, and three of the women who had followed Jesus for years and who had walked with him all the way to the cross and supervised his burial were up early to return to the tomb to finish their work, the embalming of his body, a time-intensive task.

The three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome, didn't greet one another with great joy. There were no alleluias, no notes of joy in their hushed whispers. They were grieving and devastated. They had seen their beloved Jesus, their teacher, stripped of not only his clothes, but every possible shred of human dignity, murdered in the most horrible way possible, and laid in the garden tomb. Sundown and the Sabbath approached quickly; the shops were all closed, so they could not even purchase the proper spices to anoint and honour his body and, in some small way, return to him the dignity that had been so cruelly taken away.

Despite their mind-numbing grief and desperately tired bodies, they rose before the dawn and made their way up to the tomb where they'd left Jesus' body. We can only imagine the thoughts going through their heads as they walked toward the tomb. What would they find? How would they move the stone? How could they face the body of their friend Jesus?

Those who have experienced grief, know that heavy feeling, a feeling of disbelief. This cannot be happening to me! They know that they wake up the next day, like the women did, put one foot in front of the other, and keep doing what they have to do.

Their eyes, were raw from the crying. Desperation and disbelief engulfed them. They'd thought ... they'd thought ... he was the one. They had believed with every ounce of their being that he was Messiah. But Messiah doesn't die. Messiah does not have a human body that needs embalming, that needs a tomb. And so, this errand, this situation in which they found themselves that morning ... well, it was unbelievable.

They must have been worried about what they'd find at the tomb. They were not stupid; they knew the Romans and the Sanhedrin were aware of the power of a martyr to stir up the people. It should not have surprised them that something had happened during the hush of the Sabbath. But, nevertheless, their grief translated to surprise. They were not ready for what they saw. The huge stone had been rolled away; the tomb seemed empty to them.

Unbelievable! They were scared before; they'd been scared for some time now. So what was a little more fear? They peered around the corner into the tomb and saw that, while his broken and lifeless body was not there where they'd left it on Friday, there was someone there. According to Mark, it was a young man wearing a white robe. He could see they were scared and he told them not to be afraid.

Unbelievable! After everything they'd just lived through, the only thing they COULD feel was fear. Afraid of the government; afraid of the Jewish leadership; afraid of each other; afraid of the future; afraid of this strange man wearing a white robe.

The man said to them, "Jesus is risen. He is not here." Well, the "he is not here" part was pretty obvious. The stone slab was empty. But, he is risen? Totally unbelievable! So they turned away and left because they were afraid, more frightened than ever before, frightened to the point of terror!

The writer of Mark's Gospel had that overwhelming task, the task of telling a dramatic story that was unbelievable in every sense of the word, from start to finish. The grief and pain, the political intrigue, the deceit and betrayal, the broken promises and shattered dreams, the mysterious man in a white robe, the stone, the crucified saviour ... arisen?

We stand here at the climatic passage in Mark's Gospel. This Easter tale begins with the women. And these women have *names!* Many women

have appeared in Mark's Gospel. Each one appears as a model of faithfulness: the woman with the flow of blood; the Gentile woman who asked that her daughter be freed of the evil spirit that had possessed her; the widow with her pennies at the temple; and the woman who *broke open* the jar of ointment in order to anoint Jesus for burial. Models of faith these women are, *but they have no names*. The women who come to the tomb on Easter morning, however, *do have names*.

These women are very significant. They are *good soil* for the gospel. The impression left by these women is that they are a group far superior to the disciples. After all, they are there at the tomb on this Sunday morning! Where are the disciples? These women appear to represent the good earth, that fruitful minority of humanity whose faithfulness demonstrates affinity with the kingdom of God.

We have high hopes for these women! Finally someone gets it right. We've had enough of the disciples. But it shall not be so. Our hopes for these women rise throughout the Gospel until our hopes are dashed in the very last verse. The women fled from the tomb in terror and amazement. *They were afraid!* The seed has fallen on rocky ground once again, as fear, not faith, motivates their actions. Just like the Twelve before them, the women too flee in silence.

Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome had bought and brought spices to anoint Jesus' body. The passion story of Jesus is surrounded by stories of women who anoint Jesus. These

tender stories of anointing surround the absolute God-forsakenness of the story of Jesus' death.

The stone has been mysteriously rolled away from the tomb so that the women have easy access to Jesus' final resting place. There, they encounter a kind of heavenly messenger who proclaims the incredible good news of Easter:

“Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.”

The secret is out at last! At the end of the Parable of the Sower Jesus said: “Everything that is now hidden or secret will eventually be brought to light.” That which was been veiled in secrecy now comes to light. There will be no more calls for people to keep quiet about Jesus the Risen One. Now they can sow this good seed for all to hear. Now they know who he is. He could only be known through his dying and rising.

Jesus had told them this consistently. The disciples totally failed to grasp the message Jesus proclaimed to them. Jesus is only finally revealed to them in his death! The disciples had not yet experienced this dying. How could they, therefore, see and hear, perceive and understand?

Mark knew, that this was not the end of the story. In fact, in order for it to be believable at all, this had better be ... just the beginning. The only

way those fearful followers believed ... the only way they came to finally understand that their friend Jesus was, in actual fact, who he said he was ... the only way the unbelievable became real to them was ... by allowing the story to reach its way into their lives until it changed them ... until they were absolutely and positively compelled to finish the story for themselves – with their very lives. And today, so far away from the events of the Gospel of Mark, the only way we're going to be able to believe the unbelievable, is just the same. We're going to have to finish the story ourselves.

In fact, maybe Mark had it right. We're a little like the women at the tomb that morning. We've heard the message ... he is not here, he is risen! We feel the compulsion to look around at each other in disbelief. How can this be? But that's all right, because what happens next is the real power of the Easter story. When we turn and leave this place, the risen Saviour will again remind us that it is in our hearts that he takes up residence by shaping, changing, renewing, transforming. Christ is risen; the story continues.

The story of new life and relationship with God is a story that is lived out over and over again in my life, in your life, in the lives of people all over this world who believe so much that death is not the end, that there is more to this story, and that it is our job to gather our wits about us, our hopes and dreams, our fears and failures, and turn from this incredible sight to live out the ending. He is not here; he is risen, the man said, and that is the beginning of the story - the beginning of our story.

Now is our opportunity to turn from the empty tomb, maybe fearful and maybe unsure, and allow the power of the resurrected Christ to enter our lives and transform them, until we are absolutely, positively compelled to finish the story. We can't rest until the message of Jesus changes us and changes our world.

Mark's story is powerful at this point. Jesus is only known in the dying and rising. Jesus is a Crucified Messiah. God raises this Son to new life. Resurrection confirms the cross as God's way in the world. This is a God present to all human crosses, and the crosses we bear and will bear continually. But we bear our cross in hope. God is a God of the cross. God is a God who walks with us in our cross-marked lives. God is a God who ultimately lifts us from our cross to join God in Easter's new life.

The disciples are to meet Jesus in Galilee "... just as he told you." Galilee is the setting of the first ten chapters of Mark's Gospel. Galilee was the land and the time of the Sower. The sowing must go on! This is Mark's version of a *great commission*. As disciples of the Crucified we are called upon to take up our cross and go to Galilee and sow the word of God on every kind of human soil; trampled on soil, rocky soil, thorny soil and fertile soil. The God who can raise Jesus from the *rock-hewn* tomb, can also raise fruit from the *rocky ground* of the lives of the disciples and from the *rocky ground* of our hearts as well. The God who raises the dead can enable us and all who hear the good news to bear fruit thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.

The commission to the disciples “to go to Galilee” is itself good news. We have identified the disciples as *rocky ground* kind of people. Three times in the boat stories they fail to grasp who Jesus is. Three times Jesus reveals to them that he must go to Jerusalem and die and be raised. He spoke to them of his cross. They continued to ask to share in his glory. Three times they fell asleep in the Garden in Gethsemane. Three times Peter denied his Lord. And yet it is these same people who are to go to Galilee to meet Jesus and to be on with the business of sowing the seed of the gospel. Surely there is hope for us all in this story!

The women at the tomb. The final words of Mark’s story are about the *fear* of these women. *And they were afraid!* Throughout our reading of Mark which we began after Christmas, we have contrasted the two responses to Jesus. People either *fear* or *believe*. It is fear, not doubt, that is the opposite of faith. This theme is raised repeatedly throughout this Gospel. The women at the tomb present us with the real possibility of a group of disciples who have *faith*.

To find out in the last verse of the story that they, too, were *afraid* is a serious jolt to the reader. We had hoped so much that they would be different from the others. We had so hoped that in light of an empty tomb *faith* would be inevitable.

And what about such an abrupt ending? How does it function in the story? We need to ask not what this ending **means** but what it **does**. It

is intended to move its hearers to respond, to excite their emotions on behalf of Jesus and the gospel message. At this point we have written off the disciples. We have no hope for them. If the women, who looked so promising in their faith, frustrate the hope of Mark's audience, for individuals who can prove faith to the courageous example of Jesus, and follow his way by going out and sowing the word abroad, is there anyone else left or available to fulfill that task? Of course there is: the audience itself and the readers.

Each individual who hears the word sown by the Gospel of Mark is given opportunity, as have all the characters in the story, to respond in faith or fear. In the end, Mark's Gospel purposely leaves each reader or hearer with the urgent and disturbing question: What type of soil am I? Rocky? Trampled? Thorny? Fertile? Will I go and tell?

The ending of Mark's Gospel does something very interesting. If the disciples fear and the women fear, who is left to *have faith*? The answer, of course, is that *we are!* The Gospel of Mark ends in our hearts as we respond to the words of the heavenly messenger who may very well be addressing us. In the story, the words were addressed to the women and they responded in *fear*. Hear these words as words addressed to us today. Let them echo in our heart. How shall **we** respond to them?

"Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He isn't here! He is risen from the dead! Look, this is where they laid his body. Now go and tell his disciples, including Peter, that

Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you before he died.”

What an unbelievable story! It began early that morning when three women, exhausted and grief-filled, made their way to the tomb. It began there, but here's the most unbelievable thing of all!. The end is ours to live. May the risen Christ arise in your hearts empowering you to *faith!*

Amen.

PRAYERS FOR EASTER - MARCH 31, 2024

Sing aloud, O mothers and sons! fathers and daughters! Siblings in Christ! Rejoice and exult with all your hearts as we offer our prayers and thanksgivings with one voice, proclaiming the good news of salvation and love we have received.

On this day of great gladness empower us to be your ambassadors, sharing the good news: good news in our kitchens and living rooms, good news in all places of work; good news in places where we gather for recreation and leisure; good news in our neighbourhoods and wherever we travel. Help us to be that good news, walking softly on this good earth, caring generously for all people, living hopefully into your kingdom.

We pray for all faithful people — and for every human soul that turns to God in longing and in love. Pull us out of our graves and into new life. Raise us from greed to generosity. Raise us from false pretense into wide circles of caring relationships. Raise us from death to life. With joy and exultation, we give thanks for the triumph of life over death. Help us to grasp resurrection; to understand its power, to see its force at work in our world, overturning evil empires, changing the hatred within us, transforming the world slowly, unceasingly, bending us towards love and truth.

We pray for those who do not share our Easter joy; for those who live unaware of the gift of the good news of your redeeming love; who live in the shadow of darkness, anxiety and despair; for those who live with hopelessness and shattered dreams; for those who live without faith or hope, joy or love, who see no resurrection, no hope of new beginnings for themselves or for the world.

Into the light of Easter morning, we bring those places in our world where war, violence, poverty, and an unending need for the basic necessities of life are the everyday experiences of millions of people. We share the weight of pain, brokenness, despair and grief of war, conflicts, violence and famine, especially in Ukraine, Palestine, Sudan, and Haiti; the abuse of power, corruption and destruction of trust and order in too many countries to name. We give thanks for the continuing aid and support given to refugees fleeing genocide and war. We pray for wisdom and discernment along with a compassionate heart where families are dividend by such mass migration.

Help them to persevere through the darkness, give them courage and strength, and surround them with your love.

We pray for the nations of the earth — for those in authority, and for those under authority. Come from the four winds, O Breath of Life, that we might live together in peace. The tomb stands empty. May the light of Christ shine upon us all.

We pray for the church, for all Christians everywhere, for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Anglican Primate Linda Nicolls, the Moravian church, for all pastors and lay workers and leaders, musicians, missionaries, and diaconal ministers. Today we uplift Spirit of Life Lutheran in Vancouver - Pr. Aneeta Saroop; North Thompson Ecumenical Shared Ministry in Barriere and Clearwater - Pr. Bruce Chalmers (Anglican); the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land; the congregation of San Juan Camino d'Esperanze and Pastor Ana Maria Jara.

We pray for those in need: for the ill, for those in hospital, for Ron Nelson for healing after surgery, for those receiving treatment and rehabilitation; for the lonely, the homeless, those battling substance abuse and for all experiencing emotional, mental, or spiritual suffering. Compassionate God, provide your strength and healing to all those in need of healing and compassion. And bless all those who help them.

We remember all those who have died, who now live with you through eternity. God of hope, we thank you that not even death can separate us from your love. We pray for all who mourn, that they may feel your care for them.

Loving God, In the joy and hope of this Easter morning, we experience the depth and breadth of your love for us. By your Holy Spirit help us to be channels of your love and grace for the sake of the world you love so much. Use our hands and our feet to spread your love to all whom we encounter wherever you have placed us. Help us each day to deepen our faith and trust in you and grow in our understanding of what it means to live as your Easter people. For we are the ones who are called to go into the places in our lives and into the world to spread love, to work for justice and to protect and uphold life for all in your Creation. You invite us to bear witness to the promise of resurrection, to accompany those in despair, and believe for them that Love is stronger than death.

Christ is alive and in our midst today. Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

God in Community, Holy One, hear us as we pray:

Our Father ...