

Easter Worship 4.12.20
La Verne Church of the Brethren

Gathering Chant

Gathered here in the mystery of this hour.
Gathered here in one strong body.
Gathered here in the struggle and power.
Spirit, draw near.

Christ the Lord is Risen, Today

Christ the Lord is ris'n today, Alleluia!
All creation joins to say: Alleluia!
Raise your joys and triumphs high: Alleluia!
Sing, O heav'ns, and earth reply: Alleluia!

Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!

Soar we now where Christ has led, Alleluia!
Foll'wing our exalted Head, Alleluia!
Made like him, like him we rise, Alleluia!
Our the cross, the grave, the skies. Alleluia!

Revelation 22:13

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.

Mark 16

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, 'Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' 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.

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it.

After this he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them.

Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table; and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, ‘Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation. The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands, and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.’

So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

Message: Choosing the Ending....and the Beginning

“There is no real ending. It is just the place where you stop the story.” I love that quote because I love to tell stories. I especially love to tell family stories. My family disagrees with my endings sometimes but from now on I’m just going to say, “There is no real ending. It is just the place where I chose to stop the story.”

It appears when we look at the end of the Gospel of Mark in our Bibles that there were people who weren’t happy with the way Mark stopped the story. Christians over the centuries have been shocked with the way the Easter story ends in the Gospel of Mark and they have been trying to clean it up ever since. According to Mark, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome fled from the tomb that first Easter morning and “said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”

Of course, well-meaning Christians felt the need to clean that ending up. Come on! This is our greatest story. You can’t stop it with “they were too afraid to tell anyone.” These three women went to the tomb early that morning, expecting to anoint Jesus’ dead body for burial. It was the way they showed Jesus their absolute respect and love. But instead of anointing Jesus’ body they meet a man inside the tomb who tells them that Jesus is no longer dead. He says, “Go tell the other disciples that Jesus is on his way to Galilee, the place where this all began. You will see him there.” They weren’t expecting to hear he had risen. That was the last thing they thought was possible. They hadn’t even bothered to hope for that news. So, what do they do? Well, they

don't go skipping down the road yelling, "Peter, John, Thomas, Jude, Andrew, Bartholomew, James, Jimmy, Matthew, Phillip, Simon. Hey guys, we have some great news for you."

No. That is not what they did and it has been bewildering us Christians ever since. These are the women who had been stalwart loving disciples of Jesus. These are the women who were last at the cross and then turned right around and then showed up early that morning to do the gut-wrenching task of anointing Jesus' dead body...the body of a man who gave them hope in hopeless times...a man that changed the way they understood the world and their place in it...a man who saw them and loved them as beloved children of God. These are the women who were most empowered by Jesus' life and teaching and most bereft by Jesus' death. They had seen the absolute cruelty of the world. They watched Jesus' body being nailed to a cross while others taunted him. They watched the agony he suffered for speaking of God's kingdom being here on earth as it is in heaven. They were devastated.

But instead of wallowing in an abyss of grief, they got up early that morning to do the hard work of caring for Jesus' body. Instead of finding Jesus' flogged and broken corpse in the tomb, they met a man they had never seen before who told them to run and tell the disciples that Jesus had been raised from the dead. It had to be their greatest wish...for Jesus to be alive again. What would make them so afraid that they wouldn't share this good news? It doesn't make sense. Seems like a bad ending to me...at least the wrong place to stop the story. Which is obviously how others felt along the way because later manuscripts of the Gospel of Mark added new endings. Tom read them to you this morning. There was the shorter one:

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

Whoever added this ending not only felt like having the women tell no one was a bad place to stop the story but also it felt the need to put in there that Peter became the designated leader and the disciples were, of course, told, even if it was only briefly. It only makes sense after all. If the women were so afraid that they told no one anything, how would we know what happened? This additional ending clears that up. We know what happened because Jesus himself made sure of it.

But then there were some that felt that both these endings stopped the story in the wrong place. There were some other points that seemed necessary to make. And so we have what is called the longer alternate ending to the Gospel of Mark. By longer, I mean that this ending is actually longer than the whole story of resurrection according to Mark.

In this ending, Jesus' first appearance is to Mary Magdelene, a faithful follower of Jesus. She is one of the few female followers of Jesus actually mentioned by name; and she is the one who receives the word of the resurrection first in all four of the gospels in the New Testament. This alternate ending goes on to identify her as the woman for whom Jesus had cast out seven demons, which is a reference to a story from the Gospel of Luke about an unnamed prostitute

that came into Simon's house when Jesus was eating there. She knelt down at Jesus' feet and began to cry. She bathed Jesus' feet with her own tears, tried his feet with her own hair and then anointed them with oil. Luke doesn't identify this woman as Mary Magdalene, but this ending does, as will Pope Gregory in the 6th century.

Just as the shorter alternate ending felt the need to place Peter as prominent, this ending feels the need to name Mary Magdalene a prostitute. Look there were people who knew it dangerous to have a woman play such a prominent role in the story of life of Christ. And yet, even here, even in this ending Jesus appears to Mary Magdalene first. She tells the male disciples that Jesus is alive but they don't believe her. Just the idle tale of a woman who can't let go.

Jesus next appears to two unnamed disciples on the road...reminiscent of the story of the Road to Emmaus. These two disciples tell the rest and they too are not believed.

So, Jesus visits the eleven disciples himself and lets them have it. It says, that he unbraids them for their lack of faith and then tells them to get their rears in gear and get out into the world baptizing and saving people. And this is where it gets truly weird. Jesus says, "If you believe in me and use my name you can cast out demons, speak in tongues, handle snakes, even drink poison and it won't kill you." Then Jesus ascends to heaven and the eleven got their rears in gear. Talk about cleaning up the ending and stopping it in a totally different place, complete with drinking poison and handling snakes.

The Easter story is so amazing and frightening and bewildering that people have been trying to jump on the bandwagon and add alternate endings for centuries. Each new era and life situation makes us look anew at this story. Because after all, there is no real ending. Just the place where you stop the story.

For several weeks now I have been asking myself: "How do you celebrate Easter in the midst of a global pandemic?" All of the old standard ways seem suddenly wrong right now. You know what I mean? We aren't going to be having community Easter egg hunts. Why buy a new Easter dress? We won't be singing, "Alleluia! The Great Storm is Over." None of that seems right this year...because nothing seems right this year.

Holy Week opened with news that the US Surgeon General said that this week is going to be the "hardest and saddest for most Americans' lives. This is going to be our Pearl Harbor moment, our 9/11 moment, only it's not going to be localized, it's going to be happening all over the country...". How do you preach after a week when thousands of people have died and thousands more are infected? How do you get up and say, "It's okay. Jesus is alive. Alleluia! The great storm is over."?

We could do what other Christians have done over the centuries and write an alternate ending... or we could stick with the one Mark originally wrote...because it turns out that Easter, according to Mark, actually has a perfect message for us.

These women went to anoint Jesus' body in humility and grief after everything had changed for them. Nothing felt normal anymore. It felt like life as they knew it had ended. What now? What does the future look like? Do we matter anymore? How do we go forward from here? Are we in danger?

And when they got there a stranger...I think it was an angel...told them that the tomb was empty. Mark wanted us to know that the tomb was empty. These women were the witnesses to the empty tomb. Jesus wasn't here anymore. Jesus continues to live they were told. "Go back to where it all started," the angel said. That is where you will meet him...go back to the beginning. In your own lives. Jesus will come to you, right in the midst of your living. It was wonderful news and it was terrifying news. I understand why they were afraid. Nothing felt normal. What the angel was saying turned everything on its head. Of course, they were afraid. It's okay to be afraid. There is no shame or stupidity in being afraid.

While people over the centuries were writing alternate endings it appears they missed the whole point. This isn't about endings, this is about beginnings. "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the ending." The Easter story isn't the ending of the story. It is a story of beginning. We are each called to speak the beginning...to the beginning Easter brings to our lives. That is what God does in this story and in our stories.

While Easter may feel all wrong this year and frightening...it is actually a chance to experience Easter anew. It might show up in a whisper this year but whispers are no less powerful than shouts. Actually, sometimes they carry even greater power.

Here is the truth of the Easter story according to Mark: the tomb is empty and Jesus is loose in the world. What looks like ugliness (and is ugliness) cannot stop the life and hope of Christ in the world. He bursts forth out of the tombs we create. Even now. Even here. Even in the midst of a global pandemic. Instead of telling the ending of this story we need to start at our beginning. In fear and trembling I invite you to answer these questions. How is Jesus bursting forth in your life...today? How have you met him on the road, at the tomb, in your own living room as you shelter in place, while meeting strangers at the grocery store while you are all wearing masks? We aren't living in the end times. Don't stop this story...because there is no real ending...just a multitude of beginnings...as there always are in Christ.

The world is turning in the body of Jesus and the future is possible. Amen.