

*Easter, Year B*

*April 5, 2015*

Happy Easter! I am glad to see you here on this special day when we celebrate our Lord's resurrection. On this day, amidst the Easter hymns and lilies, the Easter egg hunt and parish breakfast, we always come back to the core reason for our gathering-- to hear again the biblical witness from the first century about Jesus being raised from the dead.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians that we heard this morning, that witness is given in a very straightforward way, almost like a newspaper report. It is probably the earliest written record that we still have, restating what had been passed down over the first twenty years or so of the Christian movement. But what we heard in the Gospel of Mark's account is very different. Though scholars think it is the earliest of the four canonical Gospels, it was written ten or more years after when Paul wrote his letter. So, though the author knew the same tradition that Paul did, he made a startling omission. Did you notice? Jesus did not show up!

Now if you go back to your Bibles later today, after your Easter dinner and nap, you will notice there are more verses written at the end of Mark's Gospel that we did not read. The lectionary group that selects the lessons for our Sunday readings have agreed with recent biblical scholars who judge those later verses are not in the original work; that Mark's Gospel likely ended just like it was read today—with the women fleeing from the tomb, afraid and amazed after meeting an apparent angel; and then they remained silent.

If the scholars are correct, and that is the ending of Mark's Gospel, I think we can all agree it is a very strange way to wrap up the greatest story ever told. Why would Jesus not appear, in his glorious, resurrected body, to assure the women that all is well? To be fair, Jesus did show up in the other three Gospel accounts of Easter morning. But Mark made a choice as a storyteller-- not to undermine the message of the resurrection, but to offer it to his audience in a surprising, unsettling, and even disturbing way.

So how does this ending work? We experienced a sense of its power when we had a man come and do a one person performance of the Gospel of Mark almost three years ago. It was really remarkable—he had memorized the entire text and acted it out in this energetic, passionate, and at times almost frenetic way. He kept our attention! And he, too, decided to end the performance where our Gospel ended today—with the women fleeing from the tomb.

In fact, what he did was actually scream and run down the center aisle and out the front doors of the church. If you were here, you probably remember it. The result was dramatic—we all looked around and said things like "Is that it? Will he come back? What's next?" After repeating a few more things like that to one another and shrugging our shoulders (people were looking at me and I shrugged my shoulders, too), we all got up, and spoke quietly to our friends, and then we left the building.

And that's the point of this ending in Mark's Gospel—not to tie things up with a pretty bow and give us clear directions of what to do next. As I read somewhere, this ending makes us part of the ongoing story of Christ's life, death, and resurrection. We enter the play, so to speak. The ending of Christ's story has not been written yet, because two thousand years later, the story is still unfolding, including you and me and the entire world!

Though Mark's Gospel concludes by reporting that the women "said nothing to anyone," apparently the word got out somewhere. How did that happen? Well again if you go back to your Bible after dinner today, you can read the endings of the other Gospels and the book of Acts—heck, read the entire New Testament—and you get an idea of what happened.

I would summarize what happened in two main actions—first, many various people had experiences of God that turned their lives around and even upside down; and second, people gathered in community to share those experiences with one another and remember what God had done for them and what God continues to do through them for us as people connected to these gathered communities that bear witness to Jesus and his resurrection.

You know about many of these early stories because they are recorded in our Scripture. Some we will hear about in the weeks of the Easter season—Thomas who actually touched our Lord's scarred, resurrected body; the two people on the road to Emmaus who did not recognize their risen Lord until they broke bread together (and then he mysteriously disappeared!); and Paul, who was knocked off his high horse on the road to Damascus as he learned that the Lord was to be found among the people that Paul was doing violence to in God's name.

These experiences of God showing up continue in the stories of saints and sinners throughout history. The stories have this in common-- when God shows up, lives are changed not just as individuals but as communities. People learn that God's loving presence is not limited to only good people or only members of a certain church or religion. God continues to show up in unexpected people and places-- like those resurrection appearances of Jesus. God shows up and lets us know that God forgives us our sins, big and small; and God calls us and empowers us to live differently because Jesus has been raised from the dead.

Those experiences of God continue in our world today. I know because I have had them myself; and I have heard from many of you who have had them, too. God shows up and lets us know we are loved and—this throws us off sometimes—that God loves other people, too. God's love is not just warm and fuzzy—it is also challenging and invigorating, like jumping into a cold mountain stream. God gets our attention in a special way that often combines joy and sorrow, repentance and forgiveness, and new life.

God's love, God's presence, remakes and redirects our lives. That's why our experiences of God are not just something for us to hold on to, like spiritual merit badges. When God shows up, God calls us to come together to remember and give thanks for what God has done for us and for others; and so we can listen for what God wants us to do next-- in and through us as a

community of faith. God wants us to be part of what God is doing today. God calls us to be part of what Jesus' resurrection started.

Because Jesus resurrection was not simply an individual resuscitation. No one performed CPR on Jesus, no one even performed a miracle to bring him back to his prior human life. That would not be so memorable. What we celebrate today is the beginning of the new creation that Hebrew prophets had pointed to for centuries. The prophets promised God's people a new way described as a new heaven and earth beyond the bonds of sin, suffering, and death that control this old world.

Jesus taught and demonstrated this new way to live, a way of mercy and truth, justice and peace. Jesus' death was the worst that the old world could do; but his death was not the end of the new way that Jesus taught and lived. Instead his resurrection was the epicenter, the explosive beginning of that new life that is still unfolding in our world today. The resurrection of Jesus gives us hope that this old world of sin and death will one day be transformed fully into God's new creation, the new way revealed in Jesus.

So I am glad you are here with us this Easter morning. This day, I invite all of us to remember and reflect on what God has done for us. Take time to think of your own individual experiences of God—when God gave you an “Aha” moment as you read or worked or sang or prayed or loved someone, so that God's presence was as close to you as a hand's breadth. It is important for us to remember those holy experiences.

Then I invite all of us to come and share our experiences with others; and listen to their stories, too. It is remarkable how God continues to show up today and transforms lives. We need a community of faith to help us remember God's loving presence among us.

That community is really important when we get discouraged about what is happening in our own lives or in the world. When we see injustice and cruelty; when we experience sickness and death. These things can make us question, may make us wonder. That is why Easter does not stand alone. It is not all lilies and bunnies and eggs—or even the good news of Christ's resurrection. As a Christian community, we always go through Holy Week before Easter. The whole story of Jesus that we remember together lets us know that God is still with us even when life seems dark and hopeless.

Our community of faith centered upon Jesus and his resurrection also helps us when we get distracted or complacent or lost as individuals and families. Our lives can get too busy or depressing and we may wonder if the resurrection is truly the epicenter of a new creation—or just an old story mixed up with eggs and lilies and such. As we gather and remember and experience the love of God in our risen Lord Jesus, we can provide answers those questions.

This year I invite all of us to come and see—come and experience-- all that God has done for us—for you—in Christ Jesus. Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. Amen.