

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 ~ Mark 16:1-8; 1:1

Again & Again, The Sun Rises

Resurrection of the Lord/Easter

April 4, 2021 ~ Communion Meditation

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They went anyway. The three women had no idea who would roll away the stone. A very large stone at the entrance of the tomb. A stone that would be impossible for the three of them to budge. So, they wondered and worried as they hurried through the haze of first light and fresh grief. “Who on earth will roll that stone away for us?” But they went anyway. This obvious and impossible impediment *did not stop them* from going forward with their urgent task.

Jesus was dead and they had to do something. These three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, had gone to bed with a plan. They would take their first chance to go to the tomb and anoint the precious, now lifeless body of Jesus. A necessary task after anyone died, back then. Yes, this was something important they could do, so with spices in hand and lumps in their hearts, they scurried along as the sun began to rise. We can imagine this part of the story because we know about death. We know the comfort that tangible tasks can provide when we are in the free fall of loss and sorrow. So much to feel and so much to do all at once: but the doing comes easier. It helps to fill the void. A little.

There has been so much death this past year. Perhaps this Easter we bring to this old, old story—a new perspective gained from living while others are dying around us in droves: Far and near. If you are listening right now, you have somehow made it through a whole year of the coronavirus pandemic. The first global pandemic in our lifetimes. No country on earth was spared: death has loomed large and long--all the way since last Easter when the scope of the crisis was just beginning to dawn on us, the scope of this crisis. Today, the cloud of over a half million COVID deaths in our nation alone still hovers in the air we all breathe. Who will roll away this stone for us?

Closer to home right here at FPC, we have experienced the death of seven beloved members since last Easter, most recently Mary Ousley joined the church triumphant on March 8. Only two years ago I remember taking her a lily on Easter and enjoying a sprightly conversation with her. We have other dear ones, family and friends, who completed their lives on earth sometime between today and last Easter, when our sanctuary was bedecked with flowers as we sang, “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.” This song, these flowers open up the floodgates of memory with tears of love and longing for those we still miss like crazy, no matter how many years it’s been.

This past year as a nation we have experienced other deaths: wrongful, shameful, violent deaths of individuals we know by name, we hear about them on the news, but have never met them. Some were victims who like the death of Jesus, were swallowed by the belly of systemic evils in which we participate. Victims of hate, scapegoating, toxic political division, even armed

insurrection. Some have been taken down in the line of duty. Death is stinging us right now. Yes, Lord we need resurrection and we need it now. But there's that large stone that gives us pause.

How long are we going to wait? This year, Easter falls on the anniversary of the death of Martin Luther King Jr. April 4, 1968, ten days before Easter that year. Dr. King delivered a speech at Riverside Church in New York City on April 4, 1967 exactly a year before he was assassinated titled, "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence." That night he offered a vision of how we might come closer to a culture of peace with justice. How we might come closer to engaging the resurrection power that brings us here today. In 1967 Dr. King proclaimed:

We can no longer afford to worship the god of hate or bow before the altar of retaliation. The oceans of history are made turbulent by the ever-rising tides of hate. History is cluttered with the wreckage of nations and individuals that pursued this self-defeating path of hate. As Arnold Toynbee says: "Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word." Unquote. We are now faced with the fact, my friends, that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. In this unfolding conundrum of life and history, there is such a thing as being too late. Procrastination is still the thief of time. Life often leaves us standing bare, naked, and dejected with a lost opportunity.¹

"Begun is half done." This is a saying I learned from a parishioner a couple of churches ago. The question for us today, is how *does resurrection begin?* Mark's Gospel telling of our Easter story brings this point home. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ is right here: In the dank, disorienting darkness of the empty tomb. Where we expected a large stone, but instead it was rolled away; where we expected a dead body, but it was not there. Where we did *not* expect, but did hear instead the voice of an angel reminding us of what Christ has already told us. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ happens when we are seized by terror and don't know quite what to believe. Let's be honest: Like the women who fled from the tomb, seized by terror and amazement: we too, live most of our days in the intersection of "I am afraid" and "I believe." This is where resurrection begins. Look no further. Wait no longer.

This is the perfect year for Mark: the only gospel where the day of resurrection story both starts and ends in alarm and terror. The story where the tomb is definitely empty, and where Christ has definitely been raised. Yet Christ himself never appears. In Mark, that's the whole story: He is not here. This story leaves us with the quiet, profound truth of the empty tomb. So blown away were they, nothing was said to anyone. At first. The original ending seemed so abrupt and incomplete that later endings were tacked on to make Mark's gospel end more like the other three gospels. They are likely in your Bibles, verses 9-20. Yet our best scholarship indicates that the original ending of the original author was verse 8. In the Greek, it feels even more abrupt: "*And they told no one nothing because.*" Yes, the final word in Mark's gospel is the little Greek conjunction "*gar*" which means because.

Mark's ending draws us full circle back to Mark 1:1, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ the son of God." It starts here, with the women fleeing from the empty tomb and

the startling news that Christ is not dead. He is not here because God said “yes” even to our worst. He is not here because all the blaming, the scapegoating, the absolute perversions of justice did not and do not have the final victory. Bitter political divisions will not have the final word. He is not here because he has been raised and is waiting for you in Galilee to engage in the work of resurrecting our lives personally and as a community, a nation, and as a human race.

The question for us today, as we prepare to come to the Lord’s Table is this: Will we eat the bread and drink the cup that will compel us to go back to Galilee where Jesus has gone ahead and is waiting? Galilee is the place of grit and grace where Christ is waiting for us. Galilee is the place that it takes grit and grace to make yourself go. Galilee may not be as much a physical place as a conversation, a hard one, that you need to have. Or a decision, a hard one, that you need to make. What is it that you are too terrified to say to others? Perhaps you have been struggling with a decision entombed in fear. Listen to message of the young man in the tomb who said to the women, “Fear not! Christ is *not* here, Christ has gone ahead to Galilee, there you will see him. There where you need to go and speak your truth, where you need to go and do the right thing, even if the thought of doing that terrifies you.

One morning in 1966, a preventable coal mine disaster struck the Welsh village of Aberfan, killing scores of people, most of them were children at their desks in the village school. You may remember the episode of the television series “The Crown” based on this disaster, in which Queen Elizabeth is portrayed as choosing to remain distant and emotionally reserved in the wake of this crisis. Instead of attending the funeral herself, she sends her husband Prince Philip instead. At the funeral the camera pans across an almost unbearably tragic sight: the villagers standing before an open grave holding a long and eerie row of the coffins of their lost children, dozens of them. Phillip weeps as the villagers in profound grief, begin to sing Charles Wesley’s hymn, “Jesus Lover of My Soul.”

When Philip goes back to Buckingham Palace, the queen asks him, “How was it?” “Eighty-one children were buried today,” he tells her. The rage...in all the faces, behind all the eyes. They didn’t smash things up. They didn’t fight in the streets.” “What did they do?” the queen asks. “They sang. The whole community. The most astonishing thing I ever heard.” In that moment Christ rose up in their throats. Together in shared grief beyond the telling, they sang the resurrection truth that death does not have the final word.ⁱⁱ

At every sunrise, God literally and figuratively turns the world around. Easter comes whether we know what to make of it or not. I hear God asking us this Easter morning: How much longer will we you wait? Let’s go anyway. For we know that Christ is Risen indeed!

ⁱ Dr. Martin Luther King, “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence,” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/beyond-vietnam>

ⁱⁱ Tom Long, “Tread Marks and Roses: Glimpses of Resurrection,” *Journal for Preachers*, Easter 2021, p.6, I have paraphrased from his article the story about the Aberfan Coalmine disaster and Prince Phillip’s response.