

First Steps in Resurrection

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

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Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021

Prayer: *O God of unexplained mysteries and unexpected events, we give thanks for Easter. Roll away the stones that prevent us from entering the world and pursuing all that is true and right, that we might live without pretense or fear as disciples of the risen Lord. Help us to take our first steps with Jesus, into resurrection...*

Only one week previously they let themselves hope that Jesus would be their Messiah, and he played the part, riding that donkey into Jerusalem, through the East gate – the symbol of a peaceful arrival. A Messianic arrival, exactly according to prophecy. And then he went to the Temple, threw over the tables of the money changers creating chaos in the center of their religious life -- the kind of trouble John Lewis has taught us to identify as good trouble -- he had a good point, they all knew it, (charging interest on those who came to make sacrifices is the lowest kind of commerce in the holiest place on earth, out of keeping with the Temple and everything it stands for). It wasn't the confrontation with Rome they were hoping for. Instead, he made it personal, asking what was going on in their hearts... and then it all began to unravel. Jesus was arrested, there was a trial, he was sentenced to death. None of his followers were perceived threats to Rome at the time, they were ordinary people, they all just blended back into life in Jerusalem. They saw him carry his cross to Golgotha, they saw him die and they knew what they knew about Jesus the man, their friend. They had three years together. Three good years.

Of all the gospels, Mark's account of Easter morning leaves the most unsaid. There is a question still hanging in the air – about what the next steps are.

A young man, maybe an angel, speaks to the women, and he says, "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... that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." But Mark doesn't tell us how that worked out; the gospel ends just one verse later with the women fleeing from the place in terror and amazement, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

The kind of afraid that is overcome by awe, the kind of afraid that makes your knees weak, your heart race, grasp for a friend's hand. The kind of afraid where you need to go back home or to a safe place, and think it over.

In the Greek the ending is even more abrupt and unusual in style: Mark says something like, "Being awe struck, they told no one, for..." And he never finishes his thought. It's a 2000-year-old dangling phrase. Mark puts a fine point on ending without wrapping up the narrative. They had to have told someone at some point. The writer of this gospel lived out the rest of his life without going back to it and adding one more word.

We ended our reading today where the most ancient authorities bring the book of Mark to a close. If you look in your Bible you will notice that there are two other endings – captured in most Bibles. Scholars believe the alternative endings were added at a later time. But the oldest ending is this one. Stopping where we did has traditionally placed the emphasis on the incompleteness of the text – placing the burden to complete the story on the people who hear

it and read it and take their own next steps. Which is where Paul also places the emphasis. You've heard this, now, what are your next steps?

Jesus walked out of his tomb, the young man, or angel, reported it to the women there in the cemetery. Just like he called his friend Lazarus out of his tomb after he had been dead for three days, and Lazarus walked out, back into his life with his sisters Mary and Martha and his friends.

I would like to suggest this morning, that each of us consider how we might finish this unfinished resurrection story. Not so much to help Mark get a better sense of how to end a narrative – you've got a couple of those endings in your Bibles; but more for ourselves, and for the future. What are your next steps... after this? Easter's next steps take place after a major set of disappointments, we have had in many ways a Good Friday year:

- We have had a year of counting the dead. Today I read that more people died in the United States in 2020 than in any other year in history, Covid19 is among our top three fatal diseases.
- More people are grieving this year than ever. We are missing people; we are prevented from gathering.
- And of course because of the pandemic restrictions, we have had a year of disappointments and setbacks. So much that we could have done with the year, but have been prevented. Our most vulnerable have been especially burdened, those in congregant living of any kind, from nursing homes, to boarding schools, to prisons. And children have had obstacles to their education, the most insurmountable in many cases being for those already most vulnerable.
- We have had a year of Black Lives Matter voices, asking us to turn our attention to questions of systemic injustice, a hard look at systemic racism in our country's institutions; and in the hearts of our people.
- We are broken in many ways after the year we have had not only all of the debilitating effects from Covid19, but we have an increase in unemployment, addictions of all kinds, domestic violence.
- As we celebrate Easter 2021, what rebirth is happening in your life? In this season? After all that has just happened.

I have my second appointment for my Covid19 vaccine next week, we are entering into a new phase, but we are not where we hoped we would be this Easter, last Easter. But Easter is a gateway... for something new to begin to take shape...an opportunity to take steps into resurrection.

Let me remind you that the most valuable things to First Church are not things at all. Yes, the endowment is nice to have, yes the building is a treasure, historical, and strategically located, but it isn't things which we are protecting. It is people. People are of most value. People is where our potential is, the beating hearts of people, the faith we hold with one another and with God.

We finish writing Mark's gospel for ourselves, by our words and actions. We have been told that he is not here, that he will not stay nailed down, sealed in, all wrapped up in burial cloths and secure with culturally appropriate spices. He will not be held by death. So if we would follow him, it will not be to places of deadly certainty. It will be into the future. That's where he is, that's where he'll meet us. We may need to take steps to catch up.

Today we are at the heart of the Christian message. In I Corinthians 15 Paul, writing just a few years later, is able to put it together for us. He writes in the style of the Greek philosophers, the basis for his own education, a series of syllogisms that end in a hymn, as familiar as Easter music – music to their ears:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures¹

It was a hymn they all knew. And then Paul lists everyone who saw Jesus, the disciples, 500 others, his brother James, and finally to Paul, but not in the flesh like the others, Paul is confident that he has had a personal encounter, and Paul asks the Corinthians about them, are they living as if Jesus is alive or dead? Would they even recognize him?

We're at the center of the mystery. Very simply: that in Jesus' triumph over death, he offers us new life. And there is more than one kind of new life, there is new life in this world, and new life in the next. You do not have to believe in it, and you do not have to cooperate. God has already done what God has done, and offers an invitation.

Jesus offers us the opportunity over and over again, to come, to be filled again, and to turn and walk from now on in the light of God. With our living Lord. And in the end, when we are broken finally, when life is taken from our mortal bodies, Jesus offers us a way to new life, in communion with those who have gone before us...

The tomb is empty, and the story is open – open ended. Like the women at the tomb, we listen again to the evidence they found, the body was gone, we hear their testimony, but nothing has been fully explained. Jesus is going on before us. He walked out into Galilee; where there were many witnesses. If we came to the tomb wanting proof, we do not get proof. What we get is life, forgiveness, a fresh start, a re-set moment, a new day, a living Lord who is ahead of us; inviting us to take our first steps with him into resurrection moments of our own.

What are you to do with such a story? This is a sermon you will have to finish for yourself. After all, you're the one who came here looking for Jesus. But he is not in his tomb; this is not a funeral; he is not dead, there is no body. By this time in the morning, he has already taken his first steps in resurrection. He's gone before you. Our hopes rise with him. Go! Tell! Jesus is risen! Alleluia! Take your next steps into resurrection 2021. Jesus already has.

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¹ 1 Corinthians 15:3b-4