

Practicing Resurrection

Mark 16:1-8

Sermon by Dan Schrock

Easter, April 12, 2020

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. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶But 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. ⁷But 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.” ⁸So 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. (NRSV)

I

In the last four weeks, I’ve been talking with Christians across the United States, from Virginia in the east, to California in the west; and from Minnesota in the north, to Florida in the south. I’ve listened to pastors, conference ministers, therapists, and spiritual directors. All of them are asking the same underlying question: what does resurrection look like for us right now? These people know that we are not celebrating Easter with carry-in breakfasts, with colorful flowers festooning the sanctuary, or with loud congregational singing. Today, Easter Sunday, our sanctuaries are largely empty and silent. What happens on Easter when the people of God are widely dispersed?

II

It so happens that the first Easter felt a lot like today’s Easter. There are at least three common themes.

1. *On the first Easter, the followers of Jesus were afraid.* Mark 16 is very clear about this. Mary, Salome, and Mary Magdalene were alarmed, terrified, and afraid. The story doesn’t say why they were scared, but we can guess they were scared the Romans would crucify them too. These three women had seen Jesus die a slow, painful death. They knew how awful it was to die that way, and they

didn't want to be the next ones hanging on a cross.

Some of have told me plainly that you are afraid of dying. You're afraid of dying alone, or dying in pain, or dying before you see your children or grandchildren grow up. If this describes you, then you have a unique connection to this Easter story.

2. *On the first Easter, the followers of Jesus were widely dispersed.* After Jesus was arrested, his followers fled in a dozen different directions, hoping to disappear. We don't know where they went, but again we can guess. Some might have stayed in Jerusalem, hiding themselves in a friend's house behind locked doors. Others might have fled back to their homes in Galilee. As much as possible, they tried to lie low, away from public sight.

They were widely apart, like we are today. If today you feel a bit lonely or out of touch with other Christians, then you too have a unique connection to this Easter story.

3. *On the first Easter, the tomb was empty.* Remember this wasn't a grave like the graves at Violet Cemetery here in Goshen. Jesus' tomb rested on top of the ground. It was more like a cave with a hollowed-out room. People could go in and walk around inside. That first Easter, the women were surprised the room inside was empty.

Today, many of us are also surprised that the sanctuary, the room where we usually worship, is empty and silent. Today we cannot meet Jesus in that space. Instead, we must meet him somewhere else. So if you're looking for Jesus somewhere else, then you also have a unique connection to this Easter story.

III

Where do we meet the risen Jesus today? And how do we express his resurrection life in 2020? I began this morning by noting that in the last month I've tried to listen to dozens of Christians across the United States. All of them are asking how to live the resurrected life of Jesus now, in our context. I've been hearing two answers.

The first answer is that we can live Jesus' resurrection by reaching out to people in need. A lot of people are trying to be helpful to others. Some people feel motivated to provide food, medicine, and financial support to those who are out of work. Some people want to stay in touch with those who are lonely or depressed. Other people are living their resurrection faith by working with the sick and the dying. Christians who lean in this direction are mobilizing themselves to meet a wide variety of human needs. This is a good thing, because in the coming months those human needs are going to grow.

The second answer I've heard is that we can live Jesus' resurrection by reaching inward to God. A lot of people have said that the orders to stay home have brought them an unexpected gift: the gift of extra time. It's easy to figure out where this extra time is coming from. Concerts, sporting events, educational events, and business conferences have been cancelled. In general, people aren't commuting to work as much. In the neighborhood where I live, car traffic is down so much that people have more or less taken over the streets. Families go for walks. Children gather in packs to ride up and down the center of the roads on their bicycles, as if the roads were built for them, not for cars.

People now have time to walk, run, and ride bicycles. But people say they also have time to pray. For years, people complained they were too busy to foster a robust life with God. I don't hear people say that much now. More often they say that for the first time, they've set up a prayer corner in their living room or bedroom. Or they sit in their favorite chair. Wherever they do it, they now have the time—and the desire—to pray. They're doing intercessory prayer, centering prayer, Bible reading, journaling, and many other prayer practices. Jesus once said that “the kingdom of God is within you,”¹ and by praying, people hoping to discover just that.

These two responses are not opposed to each other. One response takes us outward, to the human needs in the world around us. The other response takes us inward, to our need for God. Both the outward and the inward are authentic ways to live the resurrected life of Jesus.

¹ Luke 17:21, NRSV, using the alternate reading in the footnote.

Easter is both a day and a season. For the next seven weeks, from now until Pentecost on May 31, we are in the church's season of Easter. Whether we do it outwardly or inwardly, this is a time for us to live the resurrected life of Jesus.