

So What Happens Next? 2021
Isaiah 25:1, 6-9 Mark 16:1-8, 1:1

Isaiah 25:1, 6-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

O Lord, you are my God; I will exalt you. I will praise your name; for you have done wonderful things, plans formed of old, faithful and sure. On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

Mark 16:1-8, 1:1 (New Revised Standard Version)

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. The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

I am more than just slightly pleased to see you here in worship today,
especially since Easter Sunday just a year ago
we couldn't even gather as a worshipping community,
or have brass instruments proclaim our hope and joy.

In fact, just last year, officials turned-down our request
for worshipers to watch from their cars in the East parking lot
and listen to the Easter service broadcast over their radios...
... it was hard, discouraging and very disappointing.

And how much more disappointing, discouraging and hope-crushing
it must have been for the disciples & followers of Jesus Christ,
with Jesus being betrayed and arrested at Gethsemane,
and the shock of his trials, crucifixion and death,
- events so horrible, beyond comprehension or expectation.

Have you ever wondered or thought about
what that Saturday after the crucifixion must have felt like
for those who had followed, who had known and loved Jesus?

The week had started out so well, with crowds waving palm branches
and joyfully shouting “Hosanna” as Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

But the week ended with Jesus unjustly and viciously condemned,
and then the shocking horror of his suffering and crucifixion...

... imagine the disciples, how crushed with guilt, shame and regret
for having fled & abandoned Jesus, just when he most needed them,
and especially Peter who had denied even knowing him 3 times.

The women, his own mother & other women who had traveled with Jesus,
who had faithfully remained with him, nearby and watching him
as he suffered and endured horrific and bloody torture,
his agonizing death on the cross just the day before -
- imagine such brutal and hideous images seared into their memories.

For all of them,
his teaching & preaching, his miracles and insightful parables
had been so powerful, hopeful and wonderfully promising.

His compassion & gentle welcome to outcasts & even notorious sinners
had so amazingly changed so many lives in every way – **at long last,**
he was someone truly worthy of following and believing in.

They had thought he was going to change their world and lives forever
as the long-promised Messiah to restore Israel's former glory,
to lift them from the degradation of Roman occupation...

... they had such high expectations and a renewed sense of hope,
until it had all come crashing down, **on that terrible Friday.**

How disappointed they must have felt that long Sabbath-Saturday.

But don't we also know,
from our own life experiences, of crushed dreams, failure & defeat
a thing or two about such Saturdays of brokenness and despair?,

for we too live with a sense of our own mistakes and disappointments
of excruciating losses, regrets, disaster, defeat and struggle.

This year of the Covid has gone on too long and costly,
& has been especially difficult for the most vulnerable.

Isolation & loneliness of lockdowns have been brutal & destructive,
and our attempts to connect through Zoom, email, text & phone calls
just hasn't fulfilled our need for human warmth and interaction.

For many families & friends, loved ones left alone in the hospital,
severe limitations on holiday visits & travel, funerals & weddings,
many have suffered and are suffering devastating harm.

No, we are not strangers to Saturdays of defeat, sadness or despair,
for none of us gets to pass through this mortal life unscathed.

So finally, for the women, the endless Saturday of waiting was over,
and at last they could go to the tomb
to render one last and final service to Jesus, their Lord,
to offer care to his viciously beaten and broken body...

... and we can well appreciate their desire and need **to do something,**

anything to pour out their sadness and to express their sorrow.

We read, vs. 1~3

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. ... they went to the tomb.

Though at least three times Jesus had spoken of rising from the dead, they weren't going to the tomb to wait for Jesus-alive to emerge.

These women went to anoint the broken, tortured body of Jesus,
which meant pouring perfume & spices over his decaying flesh...

... and in some way,

I think we can identify with what they were feeling and doing...

... for at times don't we try to cover the hurt or pain we're feeling?

The women went to the tomb broken-hearted, defeated and grieving.

They came intending to pour perfume on a corpse,
but the tomb was empty – there was no corpse,
and they found instead **the tomb filled with Easter.**

And that is the point, the promise, healing and hope of Easter,
that God has something far better and more spectacular in process,
far more wonderful than just pouring perfume and spices
to cover the foul and putrid stench of a rotting corpse.

Easter is about new possibilities way beyond our expectations,
meaning that we don't have to remain trapped – **entombed by the past,**
and that whatever our present circumstances, trials or troubles,
that's not the end of our story,
for Easter grace means unexpected hope and possibilities.

Continuing, vs. 4~7

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...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."

**That is the heart of the gospel... the Good News and gracious promise,
that God does not just pour perfume over the dead and corrupted,
... but that God raises the dead, raises us to new life.**

When this gospel was first written, Nero was emperor in Rome.

He was a most cruel and sadistic persecutor of Christians,
who for fun and sport fed them to lions in the Coliseum.

It was also under Nero's reign that both Peter and Paul were executed.

It was a most difficult, fearful and dangerous time for Christians.

Mark's readers didn't need to be convinced of the resurrection,
but how to live the Gospel faithfully amid Nero's persecution.

They didn't need a history lesson, but assurance of Christ with them,

-- which is also why we are here today!

This gospel was written to strengthen and encourage them,
to help them endure & overcome that terrible suffering **with hope,**

that Easter would surely follow their hard Saturday of despair.

Mark's gospel suggests and teaches two major & encouraging truths about suffering and disappointment, about struggle and defeat.

1st
don't assume suffering is a sign of God's judgment or displeasure –
for Jesus certainly suffered greatly, but not because he sinned.

So too when we suffer and struggle,
that doesn't mean that it's because we have sinned or offended God.
We should not assume that suffering & sin are always connected.
Sometimes we're just caught in the corruption & evil of other people.

Which leads to the 2nd point, **the Easter promise & assurance of hope**,
that Jesus is present with us amid all our struggles and suffering,
as we read in the Mark text: vs. 7 he is going ahead of you to Galilee.

Galilee was the everyday world of Jesus with his disciples,
the place where they lived and worked and made their homes,
and where they were called to follow as he taught and healed,
where Christ was revealed by his words and deeds of grace.

Galilee is where in the ordinary of life we encounter the risen Lord,
where we are to work out and live our part of Mark's Easter story,
for regardless of our past & failures, we can have a fresh start...
... just as Peter, who had denied that he even knew Jesus three times,
yet is specifically mentioned by name.
He's not rejected, but Peter is graciously restored.

That is also our hope and our certain assurance of **God's always-grace**
because even when we have failed or we have denied our Lord,
yet Jesus will not ever abandon or reject any of us...
--- for we are indeed, still precious to God.

And what matters to us today is not just what happened way back then,
but the difference the resurrection of Jesus **still makes today...**
... because Easter resurrection is just the beginning of story.

Many preachers avoid the version of the Easter story in Mark,
because it's difficult, and there's no resurrection appearance.
Instead, it ends with terrified women running off
too afraid to tell anyone what they have seen & heard. vs. 8
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.

The writer choose to end Mark's gospel with 'terror and amazement',
or more literally in the Grk, "trembling with *εκστασις* or ecstasy",
which means awe & astounded wonder more than panic and fright.

Some Bible interpreters condemn these women for being fearful,
for disobeying the young man in the tomb's instructions.
Yet, maybe their silence is not the faithlessness of fearful terror,
but it's the speechlessness of wonder, mystery and stunned awe...

... and the writer intended for their stunned and shocked reaction
to emphasize how amazing, mysterious and incredible it was...
... and since we do know about it, later on they must've told somebody!

The Gospel writer's ending is abrupt, awkward and ambiguous,
intentionally leaving us dissatisfied, the mystery unresolved,
which is intended to bring us back around again to Mark 1:1
The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...

... and so now, here's how Mark's Gospel is all connected.

With the empty tomb full of Easter and the resurrection now in mind,
all the events, the miracles, and all that Jesus said and did,
will now, finally all fit together and start to make sense,
**as they take on new meaning in the light of the resurrection
as the last verse circles the reader back around to first verse.**

The point is, the Easter story of Mark's Gospel
doesn't have an ending because the story isn't really over.

**Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again,
and meanwhile the followers of Jesus have something to do.**
Easter is just the beginning of the story, the beginning of our story.

Indeed, the Christian story, the Gospel truth and God's word proceeds
and down through the ages, the story continues to be written
and we will add to the story by the living out of our lives.

We have to decide, like those trembling and awe-stuck women of Mark,
whether or not we will obey and trust Easter truth,
whether or not we will live out its promise and hope,

**...for the gospel story is still ongoing and still in process,
as we become and we play a part in the flow of the Good News.**

**So when is an end not an end?
When the end is really just the beginning of healing and hope,
of a story about the promise of abundant and eternal life...**

... as it was described long ago by the Prophet Isaiah, Isaiah 25:8-9

Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, ... for the Lord has spoken. It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

It's almost as if you were reading an Agatha Christie mystery novel,
only to find that someone has torn out the last few pages -
and you are left wondering, 'so, how does this story end?'

Easter is God's call of renewed hope & the promise of gracious love
especially for those of us who have ever messed up or doubted,

because Easter means more possibilities beyond our expectations
and that we don't have to remain trapped – entombed by the past,
for the risen Lord offers endless 2nd chances empowered by grace!

The message of Easter is that of unexpected victory, joy and hope,
not just living with loss or learning to live defeat & hopelessness
--- and that is why Easter still matters.

Easter means that Saturday's despair, discouragement and defeat,
our disappointments, mistakes and losses are not final or the end,

because God promises & brings us far better & more wonderful
than just pouring perfume and spices over a rotting corpse.

Our call is to let God break through our darkness, fear and struggles,
to see with newly opened eyes of confident hope and trusting faith,
for there are new possibilities & healing beyond our expectations.

So today,

we celebrate that God is with us for Jesus is risen and lives,
and since the story is still unfinished, the question is,
what am I, what are you,
what are we going to do about it?