

April 8 **Easter**

*Believe the Good News*

Mark 1:9-14, 16:1-8

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Many bumper stickers and t-shirts are messages about life, sometimes serious, sometimes humorous, that reveal a little about our personality and beliefs. Our son Greg has a t-shirt that says, *"What if the hokey pokey really is what it's all about?"* Did you know it was eleven years ago this week that Larry LaPrise, the man who wrote "The Hokey Pokey", died peacefully at the age of 83 in Boise, Idaho? The most traumatic part for his family was getting him into the coffin.

First they put his left leg in... then the trouble started.

Part of the joy of Easter is that the body of Jesus was put in a tomb, but Jesus didn't stay there. Easter comes with a message more important than any bumper sticker or t-shirt; it's a message about **believing Good News and telling it to others**. Listen to the resurrection story from Mark's Gospel.

"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 women who come to the tomb in Mark 16 are grieving and in shock as some of us are today who have recently lost a loved one. There are many grieving people who find themselves in a similar place as these women. Easter is a day for those who are grieving.

What do we know about these grieving women who came to the tomb – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joses, and Salome? In Mark 15:40 they are present at a distance when Jesus is dying on the cross which tells us **they have**

**courage to risk being publicly associated with Christ.** Friday evening I saw a story on the news about the persecution of Christians in China who meet in small groups called house churches. There was also a video of a group of Christians who were gathered at a site where a church building was being constructed when all of a sudden the government showed up with construction equipment and knocked it down. A man shared how Christians in China face the possibility of beatings and imprisonment. I said to Jill, I wonder how we would handle that kind of environment. How many of us would be here today if that threat hung over our gathering for worship? Our biggest fear is getting a parking space and what's for dinner. Give the women in the Gospel credit – **they have the courage to risk being publicly associated with Christ. What are we prepared to do?**

In Mark 15:41 we learn that the women, followed Jesus and provided for his needs when he was in Galilee. They have not just been casual or occasional observers in the crowd. They have **committed themselves to following Jesus, serving him, and providing resources to support his ministry.** Again they are an example for us; Jesus calls us to do the same.

In Mark 15:47 we discover the women stayed long enough after Jesus died to see Joseph of Arimathea take down the body of Christ and they went to see the tomb where Joseph placed the body.

In Mark 16:1-2 the women are portrayed as going to the tomb at the first possible moment to properly anoint Jesus' body. In all these snapshots we see the women are examples of a desperately needed virtue in our world today – **courageous compassion. They care enough about Jesus to stick with him and to serve and support him even when it is risky and difficult.**

As the women went to Jesus' tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week, the question foremost in their minds was who would roll away the large stone blocking the entrance to the tomb so they could anoint Jesus' dead body.

The women are worrying about who will roll away the stone for them, because that obstacle is too large for them to move on their own, but when they arrive God has already taken care of it.

Often times in life we spend many useless and wasted hours worrying about things that never take place or that we never have to face. God has gone before us and cleared the path, made a way, or opened a door.

The women are shocked not only that the stone has been rolled away but also to discover a young man robed in white who tells them not to be alarmed and then shares the unbelievably good news about Jesus of Nazareth, "**He has been raised; he is not here.**" The women are charged to tell the other disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee, just as he told them. This reminder from the messenger is meant to remind the women that Jesus had already told them about what was to happen before he was crucified.

Verse 8 records their response to this incredible experience,

*"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.**"*

Why did these courageous compassionate women flee in silence and terror? Well cemeteries can be a little spooky at night or in the early morning. We can understand how a tomb or cemetery can make some folks uneasy. It's like the incident that happened on the outskirts of a small southern town, where there was a big, old pecan tree just inside a cemetery fence. Early one morning before most folks were up, two boys filled up a bucketful of nuts and sat down by the pecan tree, out of sight, and began dividing the nuts. *"One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me,"* said one boy. Several dropped and rolled down toward the fence. Another boy came riding along the road on his bicycle. As he passed, he thought he heard voices from inside the cemetery. He slowed down to investigate. Sure enough, he heard, *"One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me."*

He just knew what it was. He jumped back on his bike and rode off. Just around the bend he met an old man with a cane, hobbling along. *"Come here quick,"* said the boy, *"you won't believe what I heard. Satan and the Lord are down at the cemetery dividing up the Souls."* The man said, *"Beat it kid, can't you see it's hard for me to walk."* When the boy insisted though, the man hobbled slowly to the cemetery. Standing by the fence they heard, *"One for you, one for me. One for you, one for me..."* The old man whispered,

*"Boy, you've been tellin' me the truth. Let's see if we can see the Lord."*

Shaking with fear, they peered through the fence, yet were still unable to see anything. The old man and the boy gripped the wrought iron bars of the fence tighter and tighter as they tried to get a glimpse of the Lord. At last they heard, *"One for you, one for me. That's all.*

*Now let's go get those two nuts by the fence and we'll be done."*

They say the old man made it back to town a full 5 minutes ahead of the kid on the bike. I imagine the women fleeing from the tomb with the same speed as the old man and the boy in that story. Why would the women be afraid? Because they've been in the presence of God's messenger, fear of prosecution for being associated with a crucified man, the potential for being mocked as unreliable witnesses if they do what they're told, the very idea that women would be given this hugely important task was a major reversal of roles in that culture. Give the women credit. They are the last at the cross, the first at the tomb, and they are still looking for ways to serve Jesus. They are not portrayed as hiding in a room or going fishing to forget their troubles like some men we could name. The women had the courage to go to the tomb **but they fled in fear and didn't tell the story**, at least not initially and that is wrong.

There is something about Mark's resurrection story that distinguishes it from our memories of Easter and from the other gospels. I'll give you a hint, someone is missing and it isn't the Easter Bunny. **No Jesus!** In Matthew, Luke, and John, **Jesus appears** to the women or the other disciples to take away their fear and doubt and to give final instructions. But Mark ends literally almost in mid-sentence and there is **no appearance** of the risen Jesus following the report of the young man that Jesus has been raised. A good study Bible will make plain in its notes that Mark's gospel ended at verse 8. The verses that come after are a later addition. Mark ends like an interactive, unfinished story or movie and we are invited to write the next chapter.

The Easter story is actually an invitation. **We are invited to become part of God's plan by deciding if we are going to believe the good news and tell it to others or not.** The messenger told the women, *"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."* Will we go and tell the story of Jesus to others or will we run away from our commission and remain silent out of fear.

The good news for the women and for us in our fear is **Jesus goes before us, just as he told us.** Jesus goes ahead and if we want to see him we have to **keep trusting his word and moving forward.** In the command of the messenger **lies the good news of** forgiveness, hope, and new life.

The promise of forgiveness is that Jesus doesn't give up on us when we fail. That is why Peter is specifically mentioned. He was the leader among the disciples and the one who denied Jesus three times. Yet Jesus is looking forward to seeing him in Galilee as well, Peter will be forgiven. Believing the good news means our failure has

been forgiven. Even when we have failed Jesus, he still goes on before us telling us what to do next on our journey of life and faith, if we are ready to resume following him with all of our heart. Part of the hope of Easter is a renewed purpose and a fresh start for disciples who have denied and betrayed Jesus. We can betray Jesus in many ways: when we give in to the pressures of temptations and trials, when we have spoken words or made decisions that contradict who God calls us to be; when we treat people inappropriately or even abuse them and fail to confess and address our wrongs; when we have forsaken our commitments, neglected the poor, ignored the lost, devoted our time and resources to matters of little eternal consequence.

Jesus knows how his disciples fail him then and now, yet he still goes before us, inviting us to meet him and to resume the journey together. The messenger knows who the women are looking for – they are looking for Jesus. Who or what are you looking for today?

Every Friday after work, a mathematician goes down to an old fashioned ice cream place, sits in the second-to-last seat at the counter, turns to the last seat, which is empty, and asks a girl, who isn't there, if he can buy her an ice cream cone. The owner, who is used to weird, local university types, always shrugs but keeps quiet. One spring day the mathematician makes an especially heart wrenching plea into empty space, and curiosity gets the better of the owner, and he says, *"I apologize for my stupid questions, but surely you know there is NEVER a woman sitting in that last stool.. Why do you persist in asking out empty space?"* The mathematician replies, *"Well, according to quantum physics, empty space is never truly empty. Virtual particles come into existence and vanish all the time. You never know when the proper wave function will collapse and a girl might suddenly appear there."* The owner raises his eyebrows. *"Really? Interesting. But couldn't you just ask one of the girls who comes here every Friday if you could buy HER an ice cream? You never know... she might say yes."*

The mathematician laughs. *"Yeah, right. What are the odds of THAT happening?"*

Some folks find the message of the resurrection hard to believe for a variety of reasons – it is unusual, it hasn't been our experience, we don't understand how it could happen. However, if we don't believe something simply because it is unusual, we haven't personally experienced it, or don't comprehend how it works – there are a whole host of things most of us would struggle with from quantum physics to astronomy to human relationships, or even how our computer works. **At some point each of us has**

**to make a decision about what we believe.** We all benefit from believing the good news of the Easter message that God can bring resurrection out of crucifixion, hope out of despair, joy out of sorrow, new life out of death. For Mark, the joy of Easter comes when we believe and tell the good news of the resurrection. God can use anybody – frightened women fleeing an empty tomb or even you and me. We can be scared to speak and still tell the story with compassion and courage. Courage is doing the right thing in spite of our fear.

How will the story of Jesus' death and resurrection end?

Hamlet said, "To be or not to be, that is the question."

For followers of Jesus the question is, "To tell or not to tell the story of God's victory, that is the question."

Telling the story is the calling of every follower of Jesus.

We are blessed to know how the story ends for Jesus, He has been raised, and he is exalted. **How will it end for us and for others God wants us to tell? *"He has been raised; he is not here,"* is the message from the angel that gives hope to us all. Believe the Good News! And Go and Tell.**

Quote for Reflection

"Anxiety and fear are what we know best in this fantastic century of ours. Wars and rumors of wars. From civilization itself to what seemed the most unalterable values of the past, everything is threatened or already in ruins. We have heard so much tragic news that when the news is good we cannot hear it.

"But the proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life. His life and our lives through him, in him. Existence has greater depths of beauty, mystery, and benediction than the wildest visionary has ever dared to dream. Christ our Lord has risen." Frederick Buechner