

## **“AN UNFINISHED STORY”**

**Mark 16:1-8**

(04-04-21) Easter

**The Rev. Victor Kim**

It's Easter Sunday and it's our second consecutive Easter Sunday that we've been unable to meet in person for worship and fellowship. I know it's disappointing, no one is more disappointed than me. I look forward to Easter every year, it's the focal point of our liturgical church year. After 6 weeks of Lent, of reflection, repentance, journeying with Jesus to the cross, it's time to shout out, **He is Risen! Love wins! Death cannot hold back life, darkness cannot consume the light, fear cannot overwhelm love.** I want to celebrate with you, in person, to hug you, to hold your hand, to look at you and smile as we give thanks for our community and for each other. I know we can't, not just yet, and that there are very good reasons for that. Let me encourage all of us to keep doing what we need to do so that next Easter, we can meet in person and we can do all that we imagine being able to do.

I was re-reading what I wrote for last year's Easter sermon and it made me laugh. I thought that maybe if we all did our part, we could celebrate Easter later in the summer, in July or August, whenever we could get back in the church. Well, just goes to show you that I cannot predict the future, none of us could have. But I did say what I want to reiterate, which is that whether we gather in person or not, **Easter still happens. The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is never dependent on whether we can gather to acknowledge it or not, it wasn't that first Easter and it isn't now, and it never will be. Jesus is risen because he is, because that's what God does.**

**But then what?** That's our focus this morning. We don't get to have any say over the resurrection of Jesus, that's God's doing and we've got no role to play in that. But we've got lots of say in how we will respond to what God has done at Easter.

One of my favorite movies is *Lost in Translation*. In that movie Bill Murray plays Bob Harris, an aging movie star having a midlife crisis, who is in Tokyo to film a whiskey commercial. He meets Charlotte, a young newly married woman played by Scarlett Johansson, who happens to be in the same hotel accompanying her photographer husband. Bob and Charlotte become friends and through an unconventional relationship, they inspire each other and the movie ends with both characters open to new possibilities for their future. At the end of the movie, Bob embraces Charlotte and whispers something to her, which we can't hear, then he leaves. But it's the look on his face once he's in his car that stays with me. Bob Harris leaves the encounter full of potential and open to a myriad of choices. We're left to wonder and imagine what his life might be like when he returns home.

**The resurrection account in Mark's gospel is an unfinished story, at least in terms of our part in it, our response to it.** Although the gospel continues past the 8<sup>th</sup> verse of the 16<sup>th</sup> chapter, it is almost certain that these last verses were added sometime after the first version of the gospel had been completed. Verses 1-8, which Dr. Topping read, constitute the original ending for Mark's gospel. And what an ending it is. Mark's description of the resurrection is straightforward, and just like the entire gospel, it seems to almost rush along. When the Sabbath was over, two Mary's, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James, along with Salome, bought spices so that they might anoint Jesus' body. They went early in the morning to the tomb, it was the first opportunity they had since the crucifixion. And as they went there was one very large question in their minds. How would they roll the stone that guarded the entrance to the tomb away? But as they approached the tomb, they saw that the stone was already rolled away and as they entered the tomb they were

encountered by a young man wearing a white robe sitting inside. Don't be alarmed, said the man, you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here, look, there is the place they laid him. Go, and tell the disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. ***Full of terror and amazement, the women fled the tomb and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.***

And why wouldn't they be afraid? Wouldn't we have been afraid? Wouldn't we have been terrified? ***If indeed this is where Mark originally intended his gospel to finish, it finishes on a very incomplete note. But perhaps the very fact that it is an unfinished story is the source of our greatest hope.***

***Every one of us is living an unfinished story.*** Some of our stories at the moment are filled with joy and hope, with success and satisfaction. Some of our stories are not so bright or cheerful. Some of us are mired in chapters of grief, of worry, of suffering and pain, of fear. Some of our stories are not very defined at present, like we have caught a case of writer's block. There is doubt, hesitation, uncertainty, we don't know what direction we should take or what choices would serve us best. ***But for each of us the reality is that these are not the final chapters of our stories, they are yet to be written.*** As long as we got up this morning and took a breath, our lives are not yet complete, there are choices still to be made, decisions yet to be determined. ***The question we may want to ask ourselves this Easter morning is, how are we living out our stories, and what compels us to make the choices and decisions we make.***

Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Theological Seminary, writes, We also know about pushing against a huge stone. We have all been pushing against something for a long time. There may be many things which represent that stone for us, an employer or supervisor who is hard to satisfy. Or maybe we are pushing against a marriage that seems destined for the ditch. Or pushing against a disease, depression, loneliness, or some obstacle that is between us and our dreams. We think that if we can just get this thing rolled back, we'll be fine. ***But as the story goes, even if you get rid of the stone, all that is waiting on the other side is death.*** Barnes concludes, ***It is one of the worst ironies of life. When we work so hard to save our lives, we are actually doing little more than anointing the dead. Even if we use up life achieving our dreams, we have still only closed the distance between us and death.*** As Jesus kept trying to explain, those who try to save their lives will lose them. Eventually we will lose our jobs, our relationships, our health, and everything we are pushing to save. The story always ends in loss. Every wonderful thing in life comes to an end.<sup>1</sup>

And that's the inevitable conclusion to every life according to the world's storyline. ***But as I said earlier, our stories are unfinished and how we finish them depends on what our response to Jesus' resurrection will be.*** You see, the women at the tomb were terrified, they were amazed, bewildered. Why? According to Mark's original ending, they didn't even see the resurrected Jesus at this point. But what truly shook them up was the reality ***that if the resurrection was true, if Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, then not even death is the final word. And if death isn't the final word, if resurrection is the final word, shouldn't how we finish our stories take that truth into account?*** If death is not the final word, but if all our efforts only find us, at the end of the day, only having closed the distance between us and death, ***then clearly our choices, the way choose to finish our stories, needs to change and be re-evaluated in light of the resurrection.*** And yes, to try to do so can be terrifying and bewildering.

It can be frightening to reorder our choices and what we live for. I think of those stories around our stories that don't have an ending we can be sure of. I think of the pandemic, how will all of this end, when will it end? Will it end with just a return to the way things were, the way we were, or will there be a difference? Will we use the present time to build a better future, will we embrace the "future with hope" that God promises or

<sup>1</sup> Craig Barnes, *Happily Ever After?* Sermon preached at National Presbyterian Church, Washington D.C.

will we just return as quickly as we can to the way things were? **I can't think of any resurrection story in scripture where the end result is that things returned to the way they were!** Our part of the story is unfinished, but we can shape the direction it will take.

I think of the recent reports of anti-Asian hate. Let's face it, this isn't a recent thing, it's only been brought into sharper focus due to recent events, including the emboldening of the use of racist language by the former U.S. president. How will this end? With more divisiveness, with each ethnic group retreating into their own corners, siloing with only their kind? Will it end with less understanding and more fear, less grace and more ignorance? I'll have more to say on this in this week's midweek meditation. There are so many other unfinished stories in our lives. You know your own stories best. Whatever it is in your story or the stories around us that aren't finished, **the good news of Easter is that we can shape the direction those stories take, in light of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many of us live trying to prevent death.**

***But let's never confuse preventing death with living. The point of Easter is to discover a new life in Christ today. Resurrection isn't only for the dead, it is also for us today.***

the good news of Easter is like that pivotal moment in the movies when you finally get it and suddenly the possibilities are limitless. Bill Murray's face in the last scene from *Lost in Translation* will always be for me the face of someone who has been given a new lease on life and who just can't wait to get started in living out this gift. ***When we finally get the truth that we don't have to live only so that we can die, that we don't have to wait for the resurrection to be realized in our lives, then suddenly our unfinished stories are stories of vast potential, limitless hope and profound possibilities.***

Jesus wasn't there when the women went to the tomb, ***Jesus won't be there if we today look for him in some tomb of our own imagining. He is alive, that's what Easter is all about. He is risen, he is gone ahead of us, he invites us to meet him where he is.*** Jesus challenges us to live as a people of the resurrection, rethinking what it is we want to spend our time, our energy, our resources and our love on, reordering how and for what we will work, ***living not to prevent death but to embrace life.*** So how will we finish our stories? The gospel leaves our part of the story unfinished. By God's grace, the way we finish our stories is in part the way the Easter story also gets finished.

As Craig Barnes again states, ***The Easter story gets finished when ordinary people do the most extraordinary things with their lives, because they gave up pushing against stones.*** Maybe the Easter story gets finished when we take a stand against hatred and racism, against divisiveness and polarization. Maybe the story finishes in our commitment to the ways of the kingdom of God, where the hungry are fed and the homeless are given shelter, when the sinner is forgiven and broken relationships are mended. The Easter story gets finished when the lonely are made part of a church family, when the sick and the prisoner are visited, and those in grief are comforted. It gets finished when parents find time to raise their children, when business people do what is right regardless of the cost, when leaders have the courage to lead. ***Our stories, the Easter story, get finished every time someone makes the terrifying realization that it is in giving life away that we find it. This life, eternal life, can be found today. But we can only receive it. And we will never be able to receive life, if we are busy pushing our way into a tomb.***<sup>2</sup>

***The good news of Easter, my friends, is that the way things are is not the way things need to be.*** The women were terrified and amazed, they were bewildered, and they said nothing to anyone. The disciples locked themselves up in a room, afraid. ***But that's not how they stayed.*** Once the truth was known, once they came to believe, they gave up their doubts, they put away their fears, they opened their mouths for all to hear, they

---

<sup>2</sup> ibid

made different choices, they re-ordered their priorities, they made love and compassion, witness and mission their bottom line. **They found the courage and the faith not to live trying to prevent death, but to live as a resurrected community, even in the face of death.**

*The good news of Easter is that the trajectories of our lives are not fixed. My friends, the rest of our lives are waiting to be written. God through Jesus Christ his son, our risen Saviour, invites us to finish them well.*

**To God be the glory, now and forevermore, Amen!**