

... AND FROM ASHES TO ALLELUIAS

Easter Sunday Sermon

April 21, 2019

Texts: Mark 16:1-8, Acts 10:34-43

Seven years ago on Palm Sunday I told the story of a commotion that took place at a bank on March 31, 2011. Good Friday that year fell on April 1, 2011; this took place the day before. A woman was saying to the teller, *"Oh, it must be an April Fool's joke. It has to be!"* As she grew more distressed and agitated, she exclaimed, *"But where will I put my money? I have been coming here for years, and I have all my savings and my accounts and my loans here! Why wasn't I warned or notified? This can't be; this has to be some sort of joke!"*

It turned out to the amusement of the teller and to the woman's chagrin that she had misunderstood a small sign on the counter. The sign read, "WE WILL BE CLOSED FOR GOOD FRIDAY." She had read, "WE WILL BE CLOSED FOR GOOD ... FRIDAY." She thought the bank was closed "for good" the next day! "Closed for good ... Friday." As I said then, I like that ... because the believer knows that Jesus did "close the bank" for good on Friday. On the cross, He *paid our debt* with finality. In the immortal words of Charles Wesley, sung in our opening hymn this morning: *"Love's redeeming work is done, Alleluia! Fought the fight, the battle won; Alleluia! Death in vain forbids Him rise; Alleluia! Christ has opened paradise."* Yes, for the believer Hell was closed for good, Friday ... and Heaven is opened on Easter. Alleluia! He is Risen!

According to Mark's rather concise Easter account, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and a woman name Salome made their way to the tomb to anoint the body of their departed loved one. They made their way very early in the morning, probably partially because they couldn't sleep, which is not uncommon for people in grief. Their grief must have been overwhelming. Their heads must have been spinning. How the alleluias of last Sunday so quickly degenerated into the ashes of betrayal and death of Friday.

They had been with Jesus since Galilee. How far Galilee seems from this place of death. In Galilee, Jesus had been so full of life, and constantly refreshing the lives of others with His words, His touch, His compassion, His healing. I'm sure Mary Magdalene in particular reflected on how Jesus had changed her life. This was the man who had given her a chance when everyone else pretty much wrote her off, this was the man who treated her with dignity and respect, while others perhaps dismissed her as a crazy woman plagued by her demons. This was the man who not only restored her faith in herself, but had instilled in her the belief that God was indeed real and alive and at work in the world ... to encourage the frightened, to help the poor, to strengthen the weak, to do battle with evil, and to bring new life and hope and a fresh start to people just like her. Jesus showed her that. This man was her Savior; this man was *their* Savior! But for these grieving women, all of that hope was "closed for good, Friday."

Or so they thought.

Mark tells us they wondered along the way how they would get that huge stone rolled away from the tomb, a stone that had the approximate weight of the car you drove this morning. When they arrived, though, they were surprised and mystified to discover the stone was already rolled back. They walked inside and saw an angel in white sitting, and their grief turned to alarm! And the angel said, "Do not be alarmed." I can imagine them replying, "E-easy for you to say!" They didn't really say that, but angels were always doing that in the Bible. They would show up, startle people out of their wits, then say, "Don't be afraid." The angel continued, "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. Look, see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples *and Peter* ... make it a point to tell Peter ... that He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see Him, just as He told you." And then, verse eight: "Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

Most Bible scholars now agree that Mark's gospel does end right here at verse eight, that the other verses were a late addition, as noted in the footnotes of your pew Bibles. The additional verses were a late addition, not part of the divinely inspired text of the original. The final verses are very different in style and content from the rest of this Gospel; they have all the "marks" of not being Mark's (*pun intended*), so don't go looking for snakes to handle or some poison to drink to test the quality of your faith (*vv 17 and 18, part of this "addendum" - "And these signs will accompany those who believe: In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes with*

their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will get well." That's not in the original; that's not inspired text.) By the second century some copies of Mark began circulating with these longer endings people had apparently added on, probably because they were thinking, "That's it? What kind of ending is that, Mark? Tell us more! Tell us about the part where Jesus met Mary when she came to the garden alone while the dew was still on the roses and He walked with her and talked with her and told her she was His own! Tell us about the part where Jesus showed up on the road to Emmaus alongside two of his friends. Tell us the part where Thomas put his fingers inside Jesus' wounds. Finish the story! You have to give us more of an ending! *'He's gone on ahead of you, there you will see him.'* That's all?!"

I think Mark might reply, "Whaddya mean, 'That's all?!' Mark's Gospel is notable for its brevity throughout the chapters, as if he just wants to get to the point; so this ending is characteristic of his style. "Jesus is alive, He is NOT dead, and He's gone on ahead of *you* and *you, too*, will find Him right back there in the Galilee where you live. Go, look for Him there, and keep the story of this Gospel going! This Gospel, this good news, is an open ended story that includes your life!" I think Mark purposely left the story unfinished with the news that the death of Jesus is not THE END and that Jesus is waiting for *you* back where you live and work.

Peter ... make it a point to tell **Peter**, says the angel. Peter, who denied knowing Jesus three times. Of all the disciples, Peter is especially picked out ... as if to assure and comfort Peter and any other "Peters" who may have doubts about whether Jesus can ever forgive them for what they've done. Of course He can, and He will! The angel wants all Peters to know Jesus is alive and waiting to meet *you*, right back where you live! GO FIND HIM! You want an ending to this story? Then go find the living Christ for yourself, back in the ordinary places where you live and work. The Gospel is not yet finished! There is a risen and gracious Savior loose in your world, waiting to make you part of His glorious never ending story no matter what you may think you have done.

Mark ends with the women being so rattled they don't say anything to anyone, but we know that eventually they do find their tongues. Peter did indeed find out. Our reading from Acts 10 has Peter adding chapters to the Gospel by his encounter with a Roman centurion, an officer of the hated Romans by the name of Cornelius. We are told in the previous verses that Cornelius was as a man who feared God, who gave generously to the poor, and who prayed regularly, and even though he didn't yet know Jesus, God heard his prayer and sent Peter to him. The Bible does not say Peter brought God to Cornelius. God found Cornelius all by Himself; He had long been at work in Cornelius' world. Of course, it stands to reason that if God is real, there isn't a corner of this creation where He is not active and present. What Cornelius needed, though, is what so many of our neighbors and coworkers and friends need; they need someone to help them understand the very real Jesus Christ Who is alive and active right here where we live ... and so Peter was sent to Cornelius and he faithfully gave the summary account we read earlier from Acts.

(The following was edited out of the spoken sermon due to time constraints; I include it here --) Sometimes we Peters in the church lack confidence; we have our doubts about whether our beliefs will resonate in the world beyond these walls. Let me assure you; they will and they do! Jesus is just as alive and active out there as He is in here, if not more so! Cornelius needed what so many of our neighbors and coworkers and friends need; they need someone to help them understand the very real Jesus Christ Who is alive and active where they live. God is very much at work in all of this world, He *loves* the world, and everyone in this world ... *everyone* ... sees His handiwork. Many don't understand what they see; they don't understand the very real, vital presence and activity of the risen Jesus all about them. If you pay attention, you will hear them telling you about their divine encounters and their longing to understand Him better. Now, they may start off by telling you about their fears for their children, about their difficulties at work, about their frustrations in trying to be a better husband or wife or parent, about their longing for something more, about something that seems just beyond their reach. If you graciously listen, it will not be long before you find they are really asking about the Savior. *(end of edited excerpt)*

And they need us to be faithful Peters giving the Easter message ... that there is a living, active and risen Savior at large Who is very much alive and at work in their lives in the Galilees where they live and work. They need Peters who will help them understand God and how in Jesus Christ life can fit together. They need Peters who will make clear the message of grace ... that everyone who believes in this risen Christ receives forgiveness of sins and a fresh start, that He is at work right there in the Galilee where they live and work and play and how they, too, can be a part of this never ending, glorious story that did not come to a close for good Friday but was indeed opened for all eternity on Easter ... this story that sprang from the ashes of death and sadness of Good Friday into the alleluias of life and hope of Easter Sunday, and continues on to this day for all who will receive Him and call on His name ... because He Is Risen! (HE IS RISEN, INDEED!)