

**Sermon**  
**Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene**  
**Easter Sunday**  
**Sunday, March 31, 2024**  
**10am**

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Theme: The Dawn of Resurrection Life

[prayer]

There is a tradition in some churches of gathering on the eve of Easter Sunday to hold a vigil for Jesus' resurrection. I experienced this tradition for the first time in seminary when a friend invited me to the Easter Vigil at her church. At twilight we gathered outside around a bonfire. The acolytes lit torches and we followed them into the darkened church. For the next several hours, we read scripture and sang hymns, recalling all the times in history that God has saved God's people. We renewed our baptismal vows and shared Holy Communion. Finally, at midnight, the priest stood at the doors of the church, popped a bottle of champagne, and shouted "Christ is risen!" Everyone cheered and blew noisemakers. And then we joined hands and danced around the sanctuary. It was one of my favorite worship experiences to date (and only a little bit because there was champagne)!

I love the Easter Vigil because it reminds us that the resurrection did not happen at dawn on Easter. Jesus rose from the dead long before then in the pre-dawn hours. There was no one around to witness the moment he stood up, pulled off death's shroud, and walked out of the tomb. The resurrection happened in silence and in darkness.

What we technically celebrate on Easter morning is the discovery of the empty tomb. Of course, we look to that discovery as evidence of the resurrection. But that was not how the women saw it as they approached the burial garden on that first Easter morning, carrying their anointing spices and their grief. The Gospel of Mark does not end with rejoicing, but with fear. Later editions include alternate endings where Jesus appears to the disciples. Like the other gospel accounts, he chastises them off for their lack of faith and commissions them to proclaim the good news. But the most ancient manuscripts end the story here, in verse eight:

“Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid” (CEB).

Why is fear the primary emotion here?

Where is Jesus, waiting to surprise Mary?

Where are her tears transfigured into joy?

Where are the disciples, running to see inside the empty tomb?

The good news of this story seems to escape its very first witnesses. God is not dead! In fact, God has overcome death! The hope of God’s kingdom lives on! And yet, the good news is met with fear, not joy.

I think at an emotional level we can all understand this. There is comfort in knowing what we know, even if that knowledge is sadness. The women came to the tomb seeking comfort in the familiar rituals of death. They wanted to perform one last act of devotion for their beloved teacher and friend. They were looking for closure – not just on the death of a person, but also on the death of their dreams for a better world, the world Jesus had embodied for them. But instead of closure they discovered the stone had been rolled away and the tomb was empty. And where Jesus was supposed to lay sat an unknown man, telling them that Jesus was not there. In fact, they were looking for him in the wrong place!

Have you ever gone looking for God somewhere and not found what you were looking for?

When I turned ten, my birthday wish was to see Jesus. I made that wish with the pure trust and belief of a young child. I wanted to see Jesus exactly as I imagined him: white robe, bare feet, kind eyes. Of course, that image was informed by many a Sunday school coloring sheet. But I also experienced Jesus as my friend, and I wanted him to look and sound and feel as real as my other friends.

Years later I have a less literal understanding of what it means to see Jesus. Yes, I see him, but not in the places and ways I once imagined. I see him in acts of compassion and justice. I see him in sickbeds and in bread lines. I see him in the faces of this congregation. I know what he has said: “Where two or three are gathered, I’m there with them” and “When you have done it for one of the least of these...you have done it for me” (Matt 18:20; Matt 25:40).

But when I am in the deepest and darkest spaces of life, I still long for Jesus in his own flesh, seated next to me, holding my hand. The ache of disappointment is real. And underneath the disappointment is the fear that my faith is an illusion.

We resonate with these women who do not see Jesus in the flesh. They are asked to trust the testimony of another person. This is still our experience today. Our faith asks us to trust – to trust the testimony of our community, and to trust our own experience of faith. There is no reappearance of Jesus at the end of Mark's gospel. The Easter story stands unresolved. This is deeply frustrating and deeply wise. Because rather than giving us the happy ending we want and expect, Mark instead gives us permission – permission to question and doubt and wonder at the outrageous claim that we have just been delivered: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified One. He has been raised. He isn't here" (v. 6).

If he isn't here...then where is he? Where has he gone? What is he doing?

The angel says: "Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you" (v. 7).

The angel is reminding the women of something Jesus said just days earlier. Jesus had finished sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. And then he looked at them and said:

*"You will all falter in your faithfulness to me. It is written, I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep will go off in all directions. But after I'm raised up, I will go before you to Galilee"* (vv. 27-28).

Of course, Peter believed himself exempt from that nonsense. "Lord, even if everyone else stumbles, I won't...I will die beside you" (v. 29).

We know how that story ended – in a triple denial. The last we saw of Peter he was weeping at the cold realization of what he had done. The disciples were indeed like sheep who went off in all directions. The angel tells the women that Jesus has gone ahead of the disciples to Galilee, which means those men were already on that road, running in fear, running for their lives. The surprise is that Jesus will beat them home. He will greet them there, ready to forgive them for

their fear and their faithlessness – even Peter with his broken pride. If that's not grace, I don't know what is.

This is the first time in Mark's gospel that Jesus's followers are empowered to 'go and tell.' Until this point, Jesus commanded everyone to remain silent because the good news had not yet come to pass (cf. 1:43; 3:12; 5:19, 43; 8:30). But here at the empty tomb, the Gospel is made complete with the resurrection of Jesus. The good news is at last ready to be shared. But the women, like the men before them, run away, trembling and afraid, and the story ends in silence.

What were they afraid of? Perhaps they were afraid to believe this good news. Perhaps they feared it was just too good to be true. And if they allowed themselves to believe, perhaps they feared what the good news meant. The women fled in terror and amazement because they knew the identity of the One who had been raised. Terror and amazement are words we use to describe the human response to a theophany – a revelation of God. The women knew that it was God who had raised Jesus; it was God who had altered the rules of life and death. Something had changed; there was no going back to the comfort of what they knew. The women – like the men, like all of us – were fallible followers of Jesus, humans struggling to understand the surprising things of God. And so often what we do not understand, we fear.

But God turns fear into faith, transforms doubt into hope, and brings new life out of dying things. Mark never tells us that the women broke their silence, but we know they eventually did, otherwise we would not have this story of the empty tomb today. Within a few hundred years, the good news spread beyond its first witnesses and became a global movement of millions, then billions of followers. Around Easter 1125, as pilgrims gathered in the great cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Pope Callixtus reminded them that on Good Friday the sun set. But on Easter morning the sun/Son rose again. And every Christian is like the rays of that sun, going forth into the world, lighting it up with the good news that Jesus is alive.

The question, then, that Mark's unresolved Easter story poses for us is this: Will we act like those first followers and run away from the full revelation of God in Jesus? Or will we believe the good news – that Jesus is alive and has gone ahead of us? Will we return home to the places where we live and work and play,

trusting that Jesus is already there, waiting for us – waiting with the same love and forgiveness that he offered the first disciples?

However imperfect our response to the good news may be, we can always return to the Lord.

We live by faith, not by sight – by our belief in the words of Jesus and our personal experience of the power of God. Easter invites us to take our knowledge of how this story ends into our lives, to go back to the beginning and reinterpret everything that has happened to us in the dawning light of resurrection life. Wherever we have been, wherever we are going, Jesus has gone ahead of us. The good news is alive. Thanks be to God!

Amen.