

Easter Day 2024
The Church of the Redeemer, Greenville, SC
March 31, 2024
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Acts 10:34-43 Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 Mark 16:1-8

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!]

In Mark's gospel, the Sabbath day is over; it is now early Sunday morning, the first day of the week. Three women make their way to the tomb where Joseph of Arimathea placed Jesus' body on Friday. We've heard about these women before: in the Good Friday narrative Mark writes that "*Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where the body was laid.*"

At Jesus' crucifixion, "*There were also women looking on from a distance; among them were Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the younger and of Joses, and Salome. These used to follow [Jesus] and provided for him when he was in Galilee; and there were many other women who had come up with him to Jerusalem.*"

So the women are not newcomers in Jesus' life. They followed him, provided for him, and now, after his horrible death, go to the tomb to give him a proper burial. On the way, they wonder how they will move the stone that covers the opening of the tomb. Stones rolled across ancient tombs often weighed between 1 and 2 tons – that is, up to 4,000 pounds.

Imagine how they felt when they found that the stone had been rolled away and that the tomb was – almost – empty; instead of Jesus' body, they see a young boy in a white robe. Looking back, we say that the women saw an angel, a messenger of God, but it's easy for us because we know "the rest of the story." No wonder the women are alarmed – this is not Jesus! As angels are known to say, this one, too, says "do not be afraid," and tells the women to share the news that the women, Peter and the disciples will see Jesus in Galilee, "that Jesus has gone there ahead of you, just as he told you." In "terror and amazement," ... they leave and say nothing to anyone."

This short ending in Mark is not very satisfying, is it? Where are the alleluias? The Christ is risen and we're telling everyone! Where is the good news of this (and every) Easter Day? Since its writing, several endings have been added to Mark, presumably to tell more of what happened, to give us the satisfaction of that "alleluia!" But just as Mark's gospel begins in indefinite, ambiguous sort of place, the desert, so does it end. Where does that leave us? It actually leaves us in a very good place. Someone said something to somebody, because Jesus' story does not end at the tomb. We know that the Good News of the risen Christ will not be hidden. This morning we here from Peter, who shares the good news of Christ with people from outside the faith community. Peter's words include that

[Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

We have been telling the good news ever since, that not only will the saving of Jesus Christ not be hidden, but that it is for everyone: Jew, Gentile, slave, master, rich, poor, gay, straight, man, woman. A preacher named B. W. Johnson, in 1891, writes:

"It has just dawned on [Peter] that Jew and Gentile are on the same footing in God's sight. Those who fear the Lord in any nation, of any race, will be accepted."

Then, now, and forever, we are known, seen, heard, and saved in Christ. That's the alleluia.

The apostles do see Jesus in Galilee; everything Jesus told the disciples would happen, does take place. Then Jesus appears, as Paul writes, to Peter (Cephas), then to *"the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, then to James and all the apostles."* Jesus appears to Paul, a disciple whose letters to the early churches we read today. Before Paul told us how to live as Christians, he used to kill Christians. Nothing will stop Jesus from coming to us, from showing up in our lives. Jesus breaks bread with people who betray and abandon him before his death. He comes to those who persecute his followers. Nothing stops Jesus from showing up – nothing! And when we see him, we are forever changed, whoever we are. That good news, that amazing love in Christ, is for you every day.

Jesus' "showing up" is the victory of Easter. Life doesn't end even with death; in fact, every end carries within it a beginning. The first sentence of Mark's gospel says that his writing is *"the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Today is a beginning. All through the gospel of Mark Jesus says *"follow me."* *"Follow me,"* he says to James and John; *"get up"* he says to Simon's mother-in-law; *"stand up, pick up your mat,"* Jesus says to a paralyzed man. Again, *"follow me"* to Simon. And to all of us: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*

Our role in the "alleluias" of Easter season and in our whole life, as Jesus tells us, is to follow, get up, stand up, deny ourselves and serve the Jesus we see in others. That's what we promise in our baptism: to seek and serve Christ in all persons. Far from doing that seeking and serving alone, we do so with each other, in community, assured that Jesus will show up anywhere and everywhere.

There is more good news today. Imagine that you and I are facing something unknown in our lives – we're sick, or have a new job, or we're missing friends and family, money's tight; whatever the unknown is, we, like the women at the tomb, are terrified. We keep going, one step, one day at a time. We have no idea what's ahead. Has this sort of thing every been part of your life? Mine, too. Our burdens are like a giant stone sealing us out of a new life, covering up our hopes, hiding joy; all we can do is the next right thing. In those times, remember Mark, quoting the ancient prophet Isaiah, giving us this assurance:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way;"

My friends, there is nothing ahead of us that Jesus has not already faced and conquered. There is nothing ahead of us that God cannot move out of the way. Jesus has gone before us in *everything*. Jesus the risen Christ leads the way, always ahead of us, raising us with him from every empty place – from sickness, pain and even death; from disappointment, despair, grief, every unknowing place. The living Christ gives us new life. Now **we** can dare to go forward boldly, follow Jesus, see Jesus in everyone, and trust that God knows the way ahead. God will move every obstacle in front of us, give us messengers of joy and life anew. We follow Jesus, share this news, show up for one another in Christ, confident that he will, as he told us, always be with us.

Today we celebrate and say with great joy: "alleluia, Christ is risen!" No one can take that joy away or remove it from our path. It is God's joy. For fifty days we will proclaim "alleluia!" Alleluia! And know in our hearts, our lives, our actions, thoughts and faith that our Redeemer lives. As Christ went before the disciples into Galilee, he goes before us into all the world. All we have to do is follow him.

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