

1 Corinthians 15: 1-11
Mark 16: 1-8
April 1, 2018
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday

Today with great joy we celebrate Jesus' resurrection from the dead. No matter where we stand on the spectrum of belief we are here because something happened two thousand years ago which ignited a transformation in the lives of Jesus' followers and transforms lives today. But let me challenge you with a thought. Whether we know it or not, we celebrate something which *did not happen*. Jesus *did not* raise himself from the dead. In the passage we heard today from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Jesus *was raised* from the dead. This is the passive voice. It indicates that someone or something acted on Jesus to restore him to life. We believe that Jesus was raised by the unbounded power of the living God.

As scholar Elizabeth Achtmeier points out, the drama of Palm Sunday lies precisely in the fact that Jesus *has not* accomplished these goals. He is just and has with and in him the unfulfilled promise of the restoration of the relationship of Israel to God. Jesus knows as he rides in to Jerusalem that he *has not and cannot on his own fulfill the expectations of the crowds which cast their cloaks and palms in his path*. This is why the prophet speaks of the king's *humility*. He is trusting *God* to accomplish the salvation which is promised in and through Jesus.

David Brooks, in his book [The Road to Character](#), describes humility this way:

Humility is having an accurate assessment of your own nature and your own place in the cosmos. Humility is awareness that you are an underdog in the struggle against your own weakness. Humility is an awareness that your individual talents alone are inadequate

to the tasks that have been assigned to you. Humility reminds you that you are not the center of the universe, but you serve a larger order. (p. 263)

Applied to Jesus, humility most clearly indicates his awareness that his individual talents and spiritual gifts are inadequate to the tasks that God has assigned to him. This is so due to the fact that at the very beginning of his ministry he renounced them. In the wilderness he refused the seductive temptations of Satan to acquire the very qualities which would make him *adequate* and would cause him not to rely utterly on his heavenly father for every gift necessary for his ministry.

The terrible events of Good Friday testify to Jesus' utter refusal to take up any power on his own behalf. He allows himself to be helpless and powerless. He allows himself to be beaten and mockingly dressed in a horrible parody of royal clothes with a crown of thorns. He willingly carries the cross that will be the instrument of his execution. From the cross he forgives those who have crucified him.

We miss the point of these events when we focus too much on Jesus' suffering. The real and profoundly moving fact is that of his complete surrender to the will of God. Such surrender needs complete trust in the reality of a power beyond human perception. Such submission requires faith in a promise which even Jesus cannot see and for which even Jesus has no guarantees. When Jesus cries from the cross, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" It is the cry of one who has arrived at the end of his human trust and now stands abandoned and alone. And then comes the final and humanly unimaginable act of surrender, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit."

For me, the account of Mark is the most honest of the Gospel reports of this Easter morning. Some women disciples come on the day after the Sabbath to complete the anointing of Jesus' body they are stunned to discover the stone rolled away from the tomb. For them the past week has been unspeakably traumatic. They have followed Jesus step for step. They have contributed to his ministry. Some of them have had their lives transformed by his healing. They have come to love him in the way that only people can do who have been delivered from suffering, or who have known the slow growth of trust, unremarkable yet bit by bit life transforming. In his company they have been shaped by Jesus' humility and have come to share, if only in a small way, that sense of serving a purpose far greater than their own personal desires. The death of the one they have so deeply and gratefully loved has left them utterly bereft and at a loss for how to live.

And so they come to the tomb trusting that, at least, death will provide the comfort of predictability and allow them to complete their tender mercies of final devotion. But the stone is already rolled away. They courageously enter the tomb. Jesus is not there. Instead they see a young man in a white robe sitting on the right hand side of the tomb. What a wonderful detail! Our translation says that the women were "alarmed". The Greek word indicates a combination of wonder and deep and disconcerting awe. It is as if the women have been robbed even of the predictability and reliability of death. At this moment there is nothing familiar to give them a handle on reality. The young man tells them do not be alarmed! Don't be completely disoriented, confused and lost! What he is telling them is simply impossible.

He says, “He has been raised—note again the passive voice—he is not here.” He tells them to tell the disciples to get up and go to Galilee, the scene of most of Jesus’ ministry. He will meet them there. Then comes the most honest part of Mark’s account:

So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

So ends the original Gospel of Mark. It is an incomplete ending. It is a ragged ending. There is no meeting with disciples and no meeting with Jesus. Indeed the oldest manuscripts of Mark end as if the last sentence is incomplete. Later Christians would supply three different endings to sew up this raw and unfinished Gospel.

This morning I strongly encourage us all to embrace this ragged unfinished gospel. Let us claim this morning that, apart from the wonderful story and all the proclamation about Jesus’ resurrection, there remains for most of us a chasm between the great announcement that Jesus is risen and our daily experience. We hear the voice of the young man, “He has been raised. He is not here.” And we recognize in all honesty that most days *that is our experience*. We *hear* that Jesus is risen from the dead. We *experience* that he is not here. Not in this world. Not with all that is going on. Not even in the struggles of our own lives. It is easy to do as many people do to conclude that this is just a product of our unmet deep desires—a fairy tale, a myth.

Yet to do so will be a tragic mistake. Mark’s gospel challenges us to complete the story. He challenges us to believe that when he was raised from the dead by the living God he called the women and then the male disciples to walk his same path of trust in the power of love which led Jesus to and beyond the cross. *He is going ahead of you. He is making a way. And*

dear sisters and brothers the only way we can actually experience this good news is to live it. We must step out in trust and faith. One step at a time, one day at a time we must step out trusting in Jesus to reveal himself along the way. If we stay where we are and wait for something to happen—*nothing will happen*. But if we dare to believe that Jesus was raised by God and that in Jesus God has restored the world to himself let us actually live that faith! Let us come together and witness to a world that increasingly no longer knows who Jesus is. He is depending on us to do our part in completing the story. Amen.