

Practice Resurrection

A sermon preached by the Rev. J. Thomas Buchanan on Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021
Friendship Presbyterian Sunday

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [the body of Jesus]. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

(Mark 16:1-8, NRSV)

"And they all lived happily ever after." That's the ending we've always looked for from the stories we hear. In one way or the other, it's the ending to all the stories we have treasured most. Against all odds, the fearsome dragon is slain ... a commoner becomes a King ... a people are set free from a tyrant ... a loveable loser gets the girl. When we hear these stories, we experience a lifting of the heart as the story unfolds a world in which the impossible becomes possible, and hopelessness gives way to joy.

Isn't this why we love the story of Easter? Isn't it the *ultimate* happy ending in which all the pain we felt as we watched with Jesus in Gethsemane, as we turned away in horror from his broken body on the Cross ... is turned into irrepressible exhilaration as Death itself is overcome?

Only that's not quite what the gospel text for this morning delivers, is it? We know of other resurrection accounts – in Matthew, in Luke, in John – which go into great detail about what the risen Christ says or does, and those stories have brought joy and hope to many generations of Christians. If you were following along with a pew bible a moment ago, you likely noticed that this gospel seemingly continues beyond the end of our passage, all the way to a verse 20!

But among scholars it is a well-established fact that these additional verses were added *much later* (several decades or more) – they are *not* original to Mark's gospel. Mark's gospel originally ended with the passage we read – and *Mark's gospel was the first of the gospels to be written*. This (short) story before us – the one with the rather abrupt ending – is ground zero for resurrection stories.

It tells of how three women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – go to the tomb of Jesus very early on the first day of the week, before the sun rises, with the intent of anointing Jesus' body with precious spices, according to Jewish burial custom. They had

faithfully provided for his needs while he was in Galilee, and had been present at the crucifixion, long after the others had abandoned him.

In preparing for their labor of love, they consider the hairy problem of how they're going to roll the stone away – the stone that bars entrance to the tomb – but when they arrive, they discover it *already* rolled back, which had to have been alarming in itself. Not knowing *what* was going on, awash in trepidation, they walk inside. There, they see one who appears as a young man in a white robe, with an impossible word: that Jesus is not here ... that he is risen ... and that to see him, they are to leave this place of the dead, and go back to their home, to Galilee, where their hearts had first been set on fire by the words and deeds of the one they loved.

What follows is one of the most starkly human and realistic verses in all scripture:
So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:8, NRSV)

And so, ends the Gospel according to Mark.

At this moment, you might be thinking ... But the story can't end *there*?! No wonder the later gospel writers felt compelled to *add* to the Mark account, for as it stands, it seems like the oldest, most original version of this grand story is missing the crucial final chapter! Is this really how the proclamation of the good news of Easter ends today? With those who loved Jesus the most fleeing a tomb, saying nothing, because they are afraid?

And yes, they were afraid. Can you even imagine what it must have felt like? Afraid and alone ... afraid and alone in a desolate space such as the late Poet Laureate Robert Penn Warren described in which the "Wind does not move" and "is afraid of itself, as you have been afraid in those moments when destruction and revelation have spat at each other like cats, and the mirror showed no breath ... and the wind, far off in arctic starlight, is afraid to breathe."

How did they even have the courage to go to the tomb that morning? How could they go on, with things having happened as they did? How do you pick up the pieces of a life that has fallen apart? And yet, from within the darkness of the tomb of despair, they hear an impossible word of hope: that for all this, for all they fear they've lost, they are confronted with the possibility that they have *not* reached the end of the story. That it's *not* over. That the time has come to leave behind this place of death and move *forward* into a new day.

They are told that Jesus is alive and has gone ahead of them to Galilee –and that, going back home, *there* they will see him: *Home* ... where his mission was first launched ... where his words were first heard ... where his works of compassion are still manifest in healed bodies and lives. *There* they *will* see him. *There* they may find their lives anew as part of a greater story that has not ended.

As you all know, I love my J.R.R. Tolkien – and no Easter sermon would be complete without a reference to him! One of my favorite scenes in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy is near the end, as Frodo and the other hobbits have returned from their grand adventure, back to the Shire. Frodo knows that his time in Middle-Earth is coming to a close, and he's in his home putting what seem to be the finishing touches on his book. And as he's finishing, his beloved companion Sam enters the room and there notices the freshly completed title page: "*A Hobbit's Tale*, by Bilbo Baggins, and *The Lord of the Rings*, by Frodo Baggins." And then Frodo looks at Sam and with a knowing smirk and a glint in his eye, tells him, "There's room for a little more."

And then they go to the Grey Havens, where Frodo reveals that he will be sailing away into the West, to enter into a kind of everlasting life ... and he hands the book to Sam. "These last pages are for *you* ... for my dear Sam, you cannot always be torn in two. You have to be one and whole for many years. You have so much to enjoy and to be and to do. Your part in this story goes on."

My friends, this is really the choice that this original Easter story presents us. Whether, in the face of despair, to close the book and turn away, or to hear and receive a summons to a new life, reborn from the ashes of the old, with new pages and chapters to be written ... To see our seeming dead ends in the larger light of a grander story in which we may yet find our place ... To find healing for our broken lives in the embrace of a Love and a Beauty which would find expression in and through us.

And to do this requires a leap of faith. You might have figured that that would come up eventually on a day like this. But by this I don't mean what you can or cannot imagine concerning what literally happened one Sunday morning 2000 years ago. What I mean is that, however we understand it, we are willing to leap beyond what makes strict, rational sense, and to step beyond the limits of our most threatening fears and our cleverest ideas.

The poet Wendell Berry calls this kind of living "practicing resurrection." This phrase has grown on me ever since I first heard it. Perhaps it will grow on you too. When I first encountered it, I superficially assumed it simply means to do good, to perform random acts of kindness.

But it's when we remember that resurrection is preceded by sacrifice that we enter into the fullness of what Berry means. It means more than kindness. It means courage. It means taking risks in the name of compassion. It means walking out of our secure boroughs of self-protection, out into the light of a life poured out in service to others. In some of his own words,

*So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it ...
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium. Plant sequoias.*

*Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns ...
Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts ...
Practice resurrection.*

“Practicing resurrection” means living generously because we are looking past the fear of not having enough. It means forgoing convenient lies in order to grapple with hard truths. It means loving the unlovable because we know our own hearts all too well. It means taking seriously everything that Jesus ever said that makes no sense ... It is letting go of all that we fear to lose. It means living with the gospel’s impossible possibility, day-after-day, in the midst of what we call the “real world.”

But this “real world” can be a scary place. It knows so much pain, and I confess that I have often struggled with taking that leap of faith. I am more familiar with flinching and backing away, fleeing from the tombs of my life afraid, unsure of what to say or do. But here, we might take some comfort in the fact that those first disciples were as human as we are. They, too, knew that struggle all too well, as they fled from that tomb that day afraid, unsure of what to say or do. They knew that it is no easy thing to practice resurrection.

But the fact that it didn’t – and doesn’t – come naturally only points to why we need to *practice*. We know that in time those first disciples were able to move beyond their fears and live with a hope beyond their imagining. In time, they would set the world on fire. The story of Jesus, so obviously over at Golgotha and a sealed tomb, lived on in them as they walked from that tomb – its monstrous stone rolled away – with an impossible word burning in their hearts and minds.

And as with them, so with us. The Greatest Story Ever Told goes on, and we are called to take our part in it – by practicing resurrection. This is the meaning of Easter.

And so, as the author Frederick Buechner wrote, “Let the preacher tell the truth. Let the preacher preach this overcoming of tragedy by comedy, of darkness by light, of the ordinary by the extraordinary, as the tale that is too good *not* to be true, because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that beat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have.”

And this is that truth: that in practicing Resurrection we discover that our own incomplete stories, with all their joys and their sufferings, are finally embraced, taken up, and fulfilled in that greater Story ... that Divine Comedy of God ... swelling with universal Easter laughter, for *Christ is risen ... He is risen indeed ... Alleluia! Amen.*