

**“Every Rising, A Resurrection”
Easter Sunday –April 24, 2011
Larry Reimer and Sandy Reimer**

Larry - Mark 15: 42-47 The burial

And when evening had come, since it was the day of Preparation, that is, the day before the Sabbath, Joseph of Arimathea, a respected member of the council, who was also himself looking for the kingdom of God, took courage and went to Pilate, and asked for the body of Jesus. And Pilate wondered if Jesus were already dead; and summoning the centurion, he asked him whether Jesus was already dead. And when he learned from the centurion that Jesus was dead, Pilate granted the body to Joseph.

And Joseph brought a linen cloth and then taking down the body laid Jesus in a tomb which had been hewn out of the rock; and he rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.

Mark 16:1-8 – Women discover the empty tomb

And when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome, bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.

Very early on the first day of the week they went to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the door of the tomb?” And looking up, they saw that the stone was rolled back – it was very large.

And entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe; and they were amazed. And he said to them, “Do not be amazed; you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”

And the women went out and fled from the tomb; for trembling and astonishment had come upon them; and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.

Sandy: Mark is different. That’s probably our main learning from our Lent and Easter theme this year, “Sundays with Mark”. Mark’s gospel presents Jesus in a unique, no nonsense way. Mark is the oldest of the four gospels, written about the year 70 of the Common Era, some 40 years after Jesus died. While we don’t know exactly who Mark was, we do know that he wrote from within an early Jesus community of Jewish and Gentile people, within the framework of Judaism, within the context of the Roman Empire’s occupation of their country just after Rome ransacked Jerusalem and destroyed the Holy Temple.

Mark gives us an account of Jesus that is slim on embellishment, filled with action and a sense of immediacy: a sense that something needs to change soon and that the time to follow Jesus is now.

Larry - What I love about the Easter story in Mark is how short it is. Mark tells his story of Jesus' burial and resurrection in exactly 13 verses while Matthew's account is 30 verses; Luke's is 59 and John writes 58 verses. Mark gets right to the point, giving us a Jesus who is crucified by the Roman authorities. The women go to the tomb with spices to anoint Jesus' body and discover that the tomb is empty. A young man, dressed in a white robe, tells them to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus. The women are afraid and tell no one.

And that's it. The oldest version of the oldest Gospel ends there. Done!

Sandy – There are no appearances of a resurrected Jesus in Mark: not Matthew's story of Jesus gathering with the disciples on the mountain in Galilee; not Luke's story of the two travelers on the road to Emmaus who recognize the risen Jesus as they break bread together; not John's doubting Thomas who puts his hands in Jesus' wounds or Jesus appearing to the disciples at the lakeshore at dawn while they are fishing. While there were other endings added to the Gospel of Mark over the next century that are included in parentheses with footnotes in our bibles, these alternate endings were not originally part of Mark's gospel.

Larry – Because Mark's ending is so short and because it surprisingly concludes with the women being afraid (some translations say "terrified"), we usually don't hear Mark's story read alone on Easter. In fact Sandy and I usually include the appearance stories from the other gospels on Easter, the ones that are filled with images that we love to preach about. Those, we think, have given us our best Easter sermons. Today, we have none of those images in Mark. At first glance, it would seem that, in this gospel of Mark that we've liked so much, we've very little to preach on for Easter.

Sandy – Moreover, Mark never uses the word resurrection. He uses the word "raised", the biblical word for getting up, waking up, standing up. It's the same word Mark used in his story of the paralyzed man who got up and walked after Jesus healed him – and the same word used for the daughter of Jairus who had died and was healed. Dying and rising is an archetypal theme, prominent in the ancient world. In the Gospel of Mark, this rising means that Jesus lives on; you won't find him in a tomb. Jesus is a figure of the present, not just someone in the past.

Larry – So what do we do with this ending? I think that Mark's Easter story gives us back exactly what we already have - the challenge of faith. The women at the tomb have the same experience you and I have today. You and I personally have not met the risen Jesus in the flesh. We haven't had dinner with him on the road to Emmaus. He hasn't broken through a locked door of a secret room where we were hiding from the authorities at night to join us for a meal. Jesus has never specifically come to **me** while I was fishing and told me to throw my net over the other side of the boat. He's never told us to touch his wounds with our hands.

Sandy – The end of Mark reads like a CSI or unsolved mysteries episode that has examined all the stories about Jesus’ death and resurrection and has come back to tell us this: Folks, we have established that Jesus not only died, but he was crucified. We know that his tomb was empty. And we hear that a young man told the women that Jesus would meet them back Galilee where it all began.

That’s all Mark gives us - and yet I believe that is enough – it is enough for my faith.

Larry – Like you, I have encountered a many an empty tomb in my life. People I loved have died. People I thought were my best friends have turned their backs on me. My heart has been broken. Causes I believe in have been rejected. I have disappointed myself by not living up to the standards I believed in.

In every one of these instances, standing there in the darkness of a dead ended tomb, there has been another voice, the voice from the shadows that I didn’t notice or hear when I was overwhelmed by the initial darkness of that moment. That voice was calling to me, but it took a long time for me to hear it.

And when I did hear it, the voice told me to go back to the beginning, to start over and try again. There was a promise I would find what I was looking for in that journey, not in the dead end of a lost cause nor in an empty tomb. That voice told me to rise up, or get up, just like getting out of bed, put on my boots, and go out the door, believing in all those things I held dear.

I could choose to believe in that voice, or not. It was up to me.

And there’s something else about the experience at empty tombs. Like the women at the tomb, I’m always afraid at first, and I don’t tell anyone.

When I choose to believe, I invariably discover risings, around me and within me. If I could write those stories, they’d come out a lot like the stories of Jesus’ appearances that the other gospel writers wrote. But they would be my own stories, and they would emerge over time.

Have you not known those moments of resurrection in your life?

Sandy - At first glance, when we read the accounts of the Easter story in the gospels, and when we remember how long after Jesus’ death they were written, it becomes clear that these gospels were not recorded by or even necessarily told from eyewitnesses. Yet there is one thread of witness that occurs in every gospel: the women who stay near the cross and do not run away as Jesus dies. In Mark, it is Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of Jesus, and Salome, the mother of two other disciples, in the company of other women, who go to the tomb on Sunday morning and find it empty. I choose to believe the witness of these women.

The ending of the gospel of Mark sends the women, back to Galilee where the story of Jesus’ ministry began and where they are told they will see Jesus again. And so it was. The crucifixion was not the end. Afterwards, people began experiencing the same power, the same spirit they had known when Jesus was alive, as they shared parables and stories, as they shared meals together, as they found their wounds healed. What was liberating and redemptive when Jesus was alive is actually still alive.

These early followers experienced something powerful: visions, faith - things you could not prove or capture with a camera even if you had been there.

That's what faith is for me: it is a choice I make, a choice to believe. And I choose to believe in a resurrection that says death is not the end, that there is more to me and to you than our physical lives. I choose to believe that there is a mystery to creation and to life and death that I will never be able to know or prove or even adequately name. And I choose to believe in that mystery, to live knowing that the Holy lives and is living with me and within me, and among us, my dear friends, my family of faith.

Resurrection comes, I believe, cradled within that mystery and seen in brief moments when the light of grace shines through the darkness in our personal lives or when we experience the unexplainable presence of someone we love who has died, or when Jesus' life and spirit come alive for us.

But it would be a mistake to couch resurrection only in personal terms, because resurrection, especially in the Biblical understanding, was a communal understanding as well. Resurrection is alive in those moments when hope and justice break forth in our world, like those days of January and February when peaceful social change succeeded in Egypt. I think of resurrection to be like the faithful joining of Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Muslim faith communities in Gainesville last week to lift up the beams and dedicate our first truly interfaith Habitat for Humanity house.

Larry: We are called, just as the women were called by the young figure in the empty tomb long ago, to find Jesus in Galilee where the story began, a story of teaching and healing, of inclusion and sharing, of children and the aged, of women and men, of outcasts and seekers, of the poor and the wounded, all being brought into the circle of care and faith, a story of God's will being done on earth for all people, where evil is overcome by good.

Every Easter, when Sandy and I work together on a new sermon, we always remark to each other that this simple ending in the Gospel of Mark is our favorite and most stirring Easter message: Why do you seek Jesus in an empty tomb? Instead, go to Galilee and you will find the risen one there, now going on before you.

I invite each of you to think of the empty tomb you face in your life right now, the place of either personal loss or some goodness in the world seemingly defeated by the forces of evil. Imagine that place where you feel most frightened, hopeless, or just at loose ends. Know that in this very place, there is a rising, and this rising becomes a resurrection for you. And in those moments, every drop of water on our face becomes a baptism; every shared meal becomes a communion, and every rising a resurrection.

Easter Prayer -2011

O God of empty tombs that fill us with despair, and Easter surprises such as make us gasp with mystery's sudden embrace, let us feel your welcome in both darkness and light.

For the part of us that doubts about such claims of wonder, we pray for welcome and understanding. When life has gotten so confusing that we do not know even how to pray, let us trust that you whisper to us anyhow, with sighs too deep for words, like

the silent comfort of a long time friend. Let us sense your reassurance that underneath all are the everlasting arms beneath which we cannot fall.

For the part of us that is seeking to hear the voice from the darkness of the empty tomb, bless this longing and let us trust the questions that continue to live in us and the future which opens before us.

And for the part of us that is able to let the mystery overtake us, let resurrection rise on us, like the first ray of sunlight on the beach at dawn, like the first discovery of love in the touch of a hand, like the sound of laughter from the backyard, like the healing where none seemed possible, like the good news that arrives in the unexpected phone call, like mystical moment when your spirit fills our lives.

We pray this Easter moment, to be able to hear the voice of new beginnings.

May our wars end.

May our planet heal from its wounds,

May people walk in kindness,

May the stones at the tombs of our lives be rolled away.

And May we rise with you forever.

Amen