

“He Is Not Here”

Psalm 139:1-18; Mark 16:1-8 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – April 12, 2020

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might dare to believe in your good news. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

I don't think I've ever used Mark's gospel to preach on Easter before. The Revised Common Lectionary has a three-year cycle, not four, and the year that mostly uses scriptures from Mark turns to John for the scriptures for Easter Sunday. Nobody seems to find Mark's version very satisfying. The earliest manuscripts stop right at verse 8 where we left off, and the “added on” endings feel forced and inauthentic. It's an Easter story with very little Easter.

But preaching from Mark is hardly the most notable unprecedented thing about Easter 2020. It is merely an appropriate adjustment to the unprecedented reality of Easter in a time of coronavirus. There are many ways we could describe the situation we're in today. We can remind ourselves that Easter is a season, not just a day, though from the looks of the current situation, Pentecost may have come and gone before we're together again. We can say that Easter is emerging in slow motion or happening in stages. In many ways, it feels like we're stuck on Holy Saturday, waiting and waiting and waiting, wondering if there's any chance something is truly stronger than the powers of death. But maybe it will work to just say that, today at least, we're having a Markan Easter, the kind where we're seized by “terror and amazement”.

Those women – Mary M and Mary Z and Salome – they had a plan. They knew what spices they needed to get, and somehow, where to get them on a Saturday night. They knew how to anoint a body for burial, and they were determined to do it right. But there was a major hole in their plan, and they knew it. “Who will roll away the stone for us?” All the gospels make a big deal about how big this stone was, and how it was put there for the express purpose of making sure nobody messed with Jesus’ body. They knew they couldn’t move that stone.

And maybe that’s where we are. Maybe we’re stuck wondering how to get the stone out of the way. Maybe it feels like we’ve been pushing on that stone for weeks and weeks, only to receive a promise that we’ll be pushing for weeks and weeks longer. Maybe May, maybe June. Maybe we’ll tip it a little bit for a few months, only to have it rock back into position just when we thought it was out of the way. How can it be Easter if the stone is still solidly in place? How can we celebrate an empty tomb if we can’t see it?

It feels like idle chatter to celebrate resurrection when our world is so mired in suffering and death. What Easter can we have except this one where, like the Marys and Salome, we are hiding at home, seized by terror and afraid? We’ve been doing our part, following the plan, but we need the stone to be rolled away, and instead, it’s sitting right where it was placed on Friday, giving no indication of going anywhere any time soon.

“Who will roll away the stone for us?” It might feel like the most relatable and relevant line in this whole story. But what if it isn’t? What if that young man dressed in white wasn’t inside the tomb, but perched on that stone that was blocking the entrance? And what if, despite the fact that the tomb seemed to still be sealed up, he gave that same speech? “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.”

“He is not here.” What if that is what matters today? Are we going to stay here, obsessed with how to move this boulder, when we’ve been promised Jesus isn’t hidden behind it anyway? Probably. It takes time, when we are surrounded by the forces of death, to adjust to the idea that love is stronger than death. We can’t gather in our beautiful sanctuary and worship the Risen Christ. We can’t greet and embrace our friends and admire the lovely colors of the season. We can’t laugh as children hunt for eggs and enjoy the fellowship of a friendly potluck, and all of that feels like it means Jesus is stuck in the tomb. But he isn’t. He isn’t there. Jesus doesn’t rise because we gather together and dig up the Alleluias and flower the cross. He rises because God raises him. Is it possible to believe in an empty tomb if the stone hasn’t yet been rolled away?

In many ways, this will be the most authentic Easter the Church has celebrated for centuries, because it will be one that takes as long to sink in as the first one did. Mark is the earliest written gospel, so perhaps it tells the story as closely to how it felt as anything. It’s going to take a minute for us to remember that love is stronger than

death. We're still pushing on that stone, hoping it will move sooner than predicted. But can we believe the promise of the angel? He's not there. He's going ahead of us. Jesus has left the building. He's not there; he's everywhere! He's in the hearts of the health care workers tirelessly caring for the sick. He's with the grocery store and delivery workers sacrificing their own health and safety to ensure others have what they need. He's in the minds of the scientists trying to find a vaccine. He's sitting beside those who mourn.

We want to stay here, pushing on this rock. But he bids us go, "through the voice of woe", the voice of those who need us to stay home for everyone's safety, his voice to us is calling. The stone will be rolled away, one day. But Jesus isn't waiting. The tomb is already empty. He isn't here. Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah and Amen!