Sermon for Easter Day Year B—2015

The Last Word . . . Without End

That’s it? Really? That’s the end? 
The three women who discover the empty tomb
are so terrified and amazed,
so bewildered and afraid,
that they run away and they don’t tell anyone?

Of all the years to have the sparsest of the Gospel announcements
and account of the Resurrection!
In the wake of the terrifying Lufthansa plane crash in France,
a severe drought in the West Coast,
religious extremists killing 147 students in Kenya,
and wars and rumors of wars swirling among the nations . . .
and in the piercing of personal suffering and illness—
our own and our loved ones,
we are offered the account of the resurrection
from our oldest Gospel—the Gospel of Mark,
and all we are offered is an empty tomb—
and the announcement that the women were seized
with terror and amazement.

It is certainly understandable if at first
we might long for something more comforting
than this rather stark account of the resurrection that,
lets face it, might have more in common with Good Friday.
But, perhaps, this account is exactly the one
we most need to be confronted by
in a world that is all too much like Good Friday.

Even in the best of times we might be unsettled
with the abrupt ending of this gospel—
So if you are like me, you want to fill in the gap this story leaves.

Yet, resisting the quest to fill that gap might be in our best interest,
most especially the best interest of our
spiritual well-being and maturity.
We might just find that this is a resurrection story
that speaks well to our circumstances and times—
or, better yet, is an antidote to them.

The thing is, in the gospel of Mark,
the disciples are not presented in the best possible light.
In fact, throughout most of Mark’s gospel,
the disciples simply don’t get it—they don’t get Jesus
or much of what Jesus is trying time after time to teach them.
This may be comforting, especially for those of us who don’t get it either most of the time.
On the other hand, let’s be honest,
Mark’s depiction and assessment of the disciples brings us down to earth and humbles us.

Most of us these days want facts and certitude.
(How many of you were watching *Finding Jesus—Faith, Fact and Forgery* last night on CNN?)
Yet, the gospel of Mark insists on presenting us with a different kind of knowledge,
a different kind of knowing—or perhaps “not knowing” as the case may be.

Perhaps, in the midst of our uncertain times, some of us might just resonate with the way the disciples are presented in the gospel of Mark.
All throughout the gospel Jesus tells those whom he heals to keep quiet,
and instead they run out and tell everybody what has happened to them;
they speak when Jesus tells them not to speak.

So maybe we shouldn’t be so surprised when the women who are told
by the young man dressed in white *to go and tell* Peter and the others
the best news imaginable—that they run away tongue-tied,
saying *nothing to anyone* for they were afraid.
Instead of speaking, they were silent . . .
Or were they?
we know that one of those women—(and my money is on Mary Magdalene!)
said something to Peter and the others.
Otherwise why are you and I here this morning?

So yes, we can assume that one of the women spoke, but what of the message of the young man in white?
“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.
he has been raised; he is not here.
Go . . . tell the disciples [those frightened, cringing men] and [especially] Peter [yes, the one who denied Jesus]
that he is going ahead of you . . .
*There* you will see him, *just as he told you.*
The only proof the messenger really offers is the truth of everything *Jesus* had told them.
This young messenger urges them . . . and us . . . to remember. Jesus said he would go ahead of them, ahead of us . . . all the way to (open hands) . . . wherever we are. Upon hearing this and witnessing the empty tomb, the women flee in mute terror joining (for the first time) all the other frightened and fleeing disciples. **Leaving us not only with an open tomb but an “open” ending.**

Once again, Mark’s gospel defies our desire to control the story by pointing out the utter failure of Jesus’ followers. The final words of the young man, which are words from Jesus himself, remain to be fulfilled.

Take note carefully of this: They are not to be fulfilled by the faithfulness of the disciples, since—at least in Mark’s gospel—they are not heard from again. *Neither* will they be fulfilled by the obedience of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James or Salome, whose terrified departure is not be smoothed over by reference to any of the other Gospel traditions.

No, dear friends, here is what makes this really good news: **Only God’s faithfulness will complete this story!**

**God does not let the Good Friday world have the last word. God does not allow us to reap the consequences of our Good Friday ways.**

Hatred and death get the last fling in Jesus’ crucifixion . . . but on Easter morning, we discover that the Last Word belongs to God—a word of Life and Love and Hope—without end.

The Word of Resurrection that summons Jesus from the tomb is the freshly uttered Word of God that summons a new creation into being out of the ashes of the old. Now, still on this Easter Sunday morning, God’s creative Word smashes the cosmic silence of Easter Saturday with the message *He is risen!* “Let there be Life!” And as the risen Jesus steps from the tomb, the New Creation is born. The Light of Christ has come into the world. The Light shines in the darkness, the Light no darkness can overcome.
Yet, we need to remember also that there is great danger if we think being a Christian is about behaving, believing and proclaiming as though we don’t have to engage or experience the brokenness and darkness of the world. If we think that because Jesus has risen, these things no longer have any power we are not living by faith remembering Christ’s death until he comes. You and I may not “like” this part of the gospel, but Jesus’ resurrection isn’t a portal into a different world where we will never see or experience suffering, sadness, illness, or evil.

Being a Christian, a disciple (one who learns from and follows Jesus), isn’t a one-way ticket out of trouble, or an insurance policy that exempts us from trouble.

No, Jesus’ resurrection is the irreversible beginning of changing how this world works.

Something has happened that means there is no going back. Death and futility no longer have the Last Word.

And the Christian hope and conviction is that sin and death will one day have no say at all, because this world will be transformed into the Kingdom of God. But such a message will cause Easter people to confront evil with goodness, to confront hatred with love, to come into deep personal contact with all the ungodly, unholy, dark places (and people) of a Good Friday world.

The “today” in which Christian faith – following Jesus – has to be lived out is shaped by that “one day” – not in the sense of passive waiting, but by faith active in love and hope—

Faith, love and hope actively shaping the world to take on the contours and structures of the Kingdom which is its destiny under God because of Easter. When that happens, resurrection – New Creation (as St Paul calls it) – becomes gradually visible and even tangible. This is what we could call being an Easter people, a community, a people that practices resurrection.
Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome discovered the empty tomb and were so terrified and amazed, so bewildered and afraid, that they run away and said nothing to anyone. At least, *at first.*

Fear, amazement, and awe are strong emotions and they can cause people to run away— we don’t always get things right *the first time.*

Once again, we need to take note of that young man in white. So notice, if you will, that he doesn’t run after the women, shouting at them to pull themselves together. He does not lead them to the homes of the other disciples. He *tells* them what to do, but he *does not* set a timetable. He seems to accept that practicing resurrection, learning resurrection, is going to involve a certain degree of fear and resistance.

But fear and resistance is not the end of the story. Eventually these women do *go and tell* the good news that love is stronger than hate, goodness is stronger than evil and that God has had the last word over sin and death. Alleluia! This story has not ended at all! It does not end with the bewilderment, with the terrified responses of the women. It doesn’t end for them and it hasn’t ended for us. *We are the continuation* of the story. The risen Christ continues to work *in, with and through* our lives, even when we *seem* to be the ones who have abandoned him.

And so, listen to this *not so young* woman dressed in white. Go! Tell! Run away at first, if you must. *Then* remember this: *you* are part of the story. And *go* practice resurrection. Remember each day in a world in which so much seeks to defeat the message of Jesus— remember that we are called to life, to love, and to new beginnings.

So now I’m going to invite you to do something that may surprise, even shock some of you. It’s something I’ve never done in church before.
It’s something that if you follow my directions all the way through, it will help you remember that you are part of the story. I’m going to invite you to take your cell phones out—those of you have them with you. If they are turned off, I invite you to turn them on. Then if you would like to join our Constant Contact mailing list . . . text the word HOLYMOLY (all caps) to 22828, at the prompt, type in your email address. After you type in your email address, you will receive an important message—it’s God’s last word . . . of love and hope without end.

Raise your hand when you have received the message. Yes! Christ is risen!

This is not a panacea against or magic carpet ride out of suffering, catastrophe or death but it is the foundation—the cornerstone—of our faith; it give us the boldness of faith, the resilience of hope, and the depth of love we need to live in this Good Friday world. We may not always get it right. We may even run away for a time. We don’t know what our journey of faith as an Easter people will bring to our story but we do not that Christ goes with us—even before us—and we know that God will have the last word without end.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!