

Easter Sermon
“A Story to Tell”

April 21st, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

Easter Sunday

Based on Acts 10:34-43 and Mark 16:1-8

SCRIPTURE:

Acts 10:34-43

³⁴Then Peter began to speak to them: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, ³⁵but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. ³⁶You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. ³⁷That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: ³⁸how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. ³⁹We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; ⁴⁰but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, ⁴¹not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. ⁴²He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. ⁴³All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” [NRSV]

Mark 16:1-8

¹ When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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. [NRSV]

OPENING PRAYER: God of life, the power of your Spirit inspired the prophets and writers of Scripture to tell your story. Then that same power raised Jesus from the dead, and continues to draw us to the story of Christ and helps us to acknowledge him as Lord. We ask that you will send your Spirit now to give us deeper insight, encouragement, faith, and hope through the proclamation of the Easter gospel; for we pray in the name of the risen Christ, and let all God's people say ... Amen.

We Have Been Telling a Story

Storytelling has been around for as long as human beings have been able to communicate—predating writing and providing all cultures with a way of passing down their history and customs and values from one generation to the next. For millennia, stories have been told for either entertainment or education—they've been told in front of large assemblies of people, in classrooms, amidst smaller gatherings of families and friends, and especially during more intimate moments in life such as at bedtime and during holiday gatherings, probably around a dinner table or near a burning fire. And, the best stories—the ones worth remembering—are the ones with good plots and storylines, with relatable characters, that grab our attention and draw us into the unfolding drama.

This, in a nutshell, is what we have been doing the past seven weeks—retelling and remembering the stories of old, the stories of God's people—the history, the events, the characters, and all the drama unfolding through the ages.

The Story of Lent

We have followed the story of Lent through a series of sermons and worship services—retelling and recounting the story of Christ's final days and death. We explored multiple characters along the way: Judas, the disciple who betrayed his master and friend, and sold out his love for Jesus to make a quick buck; Caiaphas, the high priest, and the other Jewish leaders who desired to preserve their tradition and power by manipulating the crowds *and* the Romans; and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, compelled to have Christ killed for both self-

preservation and the preservation of an uneasy peace by avoiding an outright revolt. Then last week on Palm Sunday we met the crowds—crowds of people so excited and enthusiastic during Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem, yet so fickle and so changeable as the drama kept unfolding throughout the week. And, there was Peter—oh, poor Peter—perhaps the most trusted disciple, the one most determined to follow Jesus to the end, but the one who abandoned Jesus most vehemently with his three denials.

The Story of God’s Salvation History

And, so then we followed the story of Maundy Thursday—of Jesus’ last night—the Last Supper, the foot washing, the intimate hours Jesus spent with his inner circle of friends, family, and followers before his arrest. Like so many others, they would have gathered to celebrate the Passover, and to once again retell yet another story during their Seder meal—the lengthy story of God’s salvation history—a story of a God involved in human history well before Egypt or the exodus, going further back in time to Abraham and even before that to creation itself; a story of a God who is bigger than famines, captivities, and exiles—bigger than the Wilderness *and* the Promised Land; a story of a God who speaks through prophets and written word, and makes promises of restoration. And, so we gathered this past Thursday night, and we remembered God’s story and how that same story continued forward from an upper room all the way to the cross—a story that continued through what we now call Holy Week to Easter and beyond.

Mark’s Gospel Story

And, that brings us to Mark’s gospel story, read aloud a short while ago. It’s interesting to follow Mark’s story and how it ends compared to the other three gospels and how they end. You see, verse 8 marks the original ending, and different writers decades later added all the verses from verses 9-20. So Mark’s original story ends without the presence of the resurrected Jesus. The disciples, who had been with Jesus since the beginning of the gospel, are nowhere to be found, having abandoned Jesus at his arrest. In fact, the followers who had so proudly walked at the head of Jesus’ pack for more than three years are missing—no characters named as in the other three gospel stories—no Peter, no Thomas,

no beloved disciple (as in John). They have all left the scene of the story. Instead, other characters enter for the final moments of the story—Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome—all part of a larger group of Jesus’ followers who loved and supported him. But, then the story seems to end—abruptly, with a seemingly unsettling conclusion.

What Ending?

The other three gospels seem to conclude in much neater and tidier ways, with no loose ends. They include resurrection appearances, words and images of assurance from Jesus to his followers, and they offer, in some ways, happier endings with more definite clarity and instruction. But, not Mark—no, Mark’s ending is ... well, no end. It’s odd in both content and grammar. It just stops, which likely explains why other writers attempted to write a more fitting conclusion in their minds. But, instead, Mark’s original story offers an open-ended narrative where the story must go on ... and that brings us finally to the Easter story.

The Story of Easter

For some, the crucifixion had seemed to end the story, but it did not. And, thankfully, resurrection doesn’t really do so either—and that’s the gist of the Easter story! Because the story of Jesus does not end with his death—it goes on ... the same God born in the manger conquered the tomb, and did something new—something unheard of! Presbyterian pastor and author, Frederick Buechner, once wrote:

“He rose. A few saw him briefly and talked to him. If it is true, there is nothing left to say. If it is not true, there is nothing left to say. For believers and unbelievers both, life has never been the same again.”¹

Indeed, one thing is absolutely certain, if Jesus had not risen from the dead, we would never have heard of him. Think about it ... Easter turned things upside down. If we take away the stories of Jesus’ birth, then we would lose only two chapters of Matthew’s gospel and two in Luke’s. But, if you take away the stories

¹ Buechner, Frederick. Beyond Words: Daily Readings in the ABC’s of Faith. HarperOne: New York, 2004. p.92.

of Jesus' resurrection, then we would lose far more than some chapters at the end of each gospel—we would lose the entire New Testament and the last two thousand years of being the church. And, we wouldn't be here now—right this very moment—retelling and remembering this Easter story.

But, we are! Because through the centuries, the church has been proof of the resurrection—nothing else than the reality of the resurrection could have changed sad and despairing people of God into people radiant with joy and oozing with courage to tell the story. That's exactly what Peter is doing in the story from Acts 10 that we read this morning—joyfully and courageously telling the Easter story to people ready to listen because that's what he was told to do, and people have been doing it for centuries since.

Go and Tell: Action Words

In fact, I believe the most precious thing in Mark's final eight verses are two small words—"go" and "tell"—a command given to all of us forever, reminding us that the promise *and* the challenge from the risen Jesus is to once again follow—that the empty tomb doesn't get us off the hook of being disciples. Rather, as it did for the original disciples, it makes it all the more serious and important that we heed the angel's words to those women long ago, "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" (v.7). And, those simple words put us to work, just like it did for Peter and like it did for all the others who have gone before us in the faith!

We Must Get to Work!

Indeed, Jesus has gone ahead from the tomb to Galilee and to every single place we can possibly imagine. Jesus always goes before us, beckoning us forward. And, this assures us of two things: first, the best of the Christian faith and story is always forward looking and forward moving because, secondly, the Christian faith should never stand still—because our risen Lord is a *living* Lord, risen to new life—calling us, as I said, to get to work and get moving!

The Story Goes On

And, this is why I believe that the original writer of Mark's gospel ended his part of the story the way he did—because it's a far better ending perhaps,

acknowledging that unlike some stories, God's Easter story continues on and on and on. And, it will continue to go on because, by the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit, it's in our hands—you and me and countless others—working together to love and serve the world.

A Story to Tell

So we have a story to tell—a wonderful and magnificent story—and we must help tell the story by our words and by our actions, with our hands and with our feet—that's how the Easter story continues to go on, being told and retold and remembered in new places and by new generations of people. Because Jesus has gone ahead of us, beckoning us to get to work and get moving.

Sisters and brothers, the stone has been rolled away. The tomb is empty. Do not be afraid. Let us be like Peter and joyfully and courageously tell the Easter story. Let us show the world who is Lord of all. Let us go ... and let us tell.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.