

Easter Sunday

Mark 16: 1-8

At the Entrance There is More.

Rev. Nick Hatch

Would you pray with me?

Joyous God, fill us with your resurrection hope and show us that your love is too big to come to an end. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, Oh our rock and redeemer. Amen.

It was a crisp autumn day and I burst through the cabin door:

“I found a bear’s den! It has a path leading in and out of it, its huge.”

Not to miss out on anything wildlife related, Maddison quickly responded “Take me to it”!

An hour later we were working through an aspen thicket: “There it is” I said pointing to a large black hole in the side of some steep earth. We decided to venture more closely. The leaves had been flattened at its entrance and tangled roots hung down like gnarly hairs.

“Do you think there’s something inside, can you see in?” asked Maddi. “I honestly don’t know” I said as I leaned in and we both said “this is so awesome”. We stood still in the windless leafy wood, peering into the dark

which didn't yield any shapes or betray its contents. "Man, it stinks" I said, Maddi agreed, and then, ever so softly, a puff of breath came right out at us like the earth itself breathed!

"Run"! We exclaimed.

To which I immediately spun around and fell flat on my face. Lying on my side I watched Maddison turn backwards and whack her head right on a tree trunk. We both then clawed our way back up, tripping and frightened and ran a good distance together.

Like the women on Easter morning standing at the tomb, our amazement and terror and curiosity are memories we won't soon forget!

Today we celebrate the gift of the Resurrection, the gift of life itself, redeemed from pointless misery or the finality of death, through God's great grace and enduring forgiveness.

Today we celebrate that our Lord Jesus Christ offers us the gift of life, filled with opportunities to stand in wonder, peer into the unknown, puzzle and even laugh at our ourselves.

Today we celebrate that our Lord Jesus Christ offers us the gift of life eternal over which we rightly weep, for every exit from our garden tomb requires both beginnings and endings, a time that was and a time yet to come.

Today we celebrate, shocking alternatives that we cannot even imagine but from whose mystery springs forth enlightenment, like the beauty of a sunrise, or the splendor of flowers this spring morning.

On Saturday evening after sunset, as soon as the sabbath is over, the three women whom Mark listed as having witnessed the crucifixion, buy spices. They go to Jesus's tomb at first light on the Sunday worrying about the massive stone in their way, perhaps discussing whom would be of help to roll it aside.

The women were not going to witness Jesus' resurrection: something like this was impossible, unthinkable, arguably futile in their efforts to grieve.

They were going to complete the primary burial: a sad but dutiful and reverent task. They were there to anoint Jesus body with oil to lessen the smell of decomposition, for due course Jesus' bones would be collected and put into an ossuary which would then be re-buried in the coming year. Apparently, they had forgotten or did not know, that previously while in Bethany at the house of Simon, another woman had already anointed Jesus with an alabaster jar of oil, a woman Jesus says would be remembered for her great and loving deeds. Nevertheless, these women were beloved undertakers living out the normal rituals of mortal death. Their resolve reflected the finality they themselves believed had taken place, and for which they mourned.

But instead, what the women found left them shocked terrified: the stone was already rolled away. A young man in white sat where Jesus' body had

been, told them not to be alarmed and calmly explained that Jesus of Nazareth had been raised and was not here. Go, tell his disciples and Peter, for you will see him again in Galilee. In Galilee, the place where it all began for Jesus and his disciples. Galilee a place of theological importance; it was a land of marginal people, known by their strange accents and unusual clothing and demeanor. It was an odd place to send them to say the least.

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 16:9

And this is how the original manuscript of the book of Mark ends. What comes after are two “extra” endings that come in Mark 16:9-20 which don’t read or sound anything like the rest of the original voice of the Gospel of Mark, and appear as nothing more than liturgical compilations of Luke and Matthew.

Regarding this abruptness, one theologian comments:

Instead of a cheap happy ending, they say, Mark has given us something far more powerful, a strange brooding puzzle which leaves every reader turning the matter over, wondering what on earth might have happened, and what it all might mean. -N.T.Wright

I wonder in what way this abrupt ending, might leave you puzzling over the Resurrection, open to its power and mystery this morning?

For great is the mystery of faith, and the tomb now empty, devoid of the stench of death, anointed with enduring commitment and love, holds a great power. It's emptiness sets us free from mortality, re-writing what is logical and what is sensible, with what is unfathomable and righteous.

Mark has told us, over and over again, that Jesus tried to teach the disciples that he would suffer, be killed, and rise again from the dead. They didn't understand; presumably they thought he was talking in riddles. Mark continually presented Jesus throughout as a true prophet, the one sent by God; they still did not understand. And perhaps, in the strange providence of God, the way the Gospel of Mark's finishes encourages us all the more to explore not only the faith of the early church, that Jesus had indeed risen from the dead, but our own faith, and our own lack of understanding. There is a blank at the end of the story, and we are invited to fill it ourselves.

Last fall, I received a note in the mail from a woman named Wendy. I will read the note to you-

(Read Note)

Inside are two bulletins that appear as new. They read "Easter at the First Congregational Church of Appleton WI" and are dated "April tenth and April 18th, Anno Domini 1898. Their covers are as beautiful and metallic as they day they were printed.

So, I called Wendy, she was so surprised, “I never would have thought to find an Easter Bulletin from the 19th century in my attic” she exclaimed.

“Yeah, you never know where the Church of the Open Door will turn up” I said jesting: “This church likes to turn up where its least expected!”.

I note that on Easter morning on April 10th 1898, the closing music was Handel's Hallelujah Chorus, sung by the First Congregational Choir, in what would be the last Easter in Little Brown Church Building. The next week, April 18th whose bulletin is in red, was a special celebration, for the next week they moved to the newly constructed Red Brick Church a few blocks away at the corners of what is now Lawrence and Oneida street.

These slips of paper represent so many things; a congregations final passage from one church building to another, a community of progressive minded people who long to follow Jesus’s path of radical social justice; a long line of hope-filled believers who through war and depression, Jim crow and abolition, journeying from building to building, witnesses to the advent of home hydro-electricity and fearsome harnessing of the atom, we have returned to the empty tomb for one hundred and seventy six years, to re-discover the fearful and puzzling glory of the mystery of the Risen Christ!

Powerfully, we are but one church in in a worldwide chorus, whose voices are united, hearts kindled in wonder. Powerfully, we are reminded that there are countless peoples who have come before you and held hope for your life and your loved ones and this community, praying that Resurrection joy would transform your life. They gathered singing:

The kingdom of this world
Is become the kingdom of our Lord,
And of His Christ, And of His Christ,
And He shall reign for ever and ever,
Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Easter, The Empty Tomb, The Resurrection it's hard to comprehend, hard to believe: we cannot wrap it in understanding. About today one theologian says:

Nothing is conclusive. The empty tomb does not prove much. One believes in the Resurrection or one does not believe in it.... (So) Let us not believe too easily. (For) A dead Christ leaves the world to us- a world that does not (always) amount to much, but is within reach. A living Christ, present- that changes everything. One no longer knows where the limits of the universe are. It opens onto an abyss from all sides. We are no longer sufficient to ourselves. We are obliged to walk in the obscurity of faith. We are marked, each and every one of us, by the Cross. Love lies in wait for us. We are too big. - Carmel Brett

Friends, standing at the entrance of the tomb, we know there is more. We come again and again, waiting for a sign of life, trying to follow the Risen Christ. For God's love is too big. The gift of the Risen Christ is glorious and terrifying, puzzling and disturbing, and it has changed margins of the entire universe.

Standing at the entrance of the tomb, we know there is more. We belong to a long line of believers, a lineage traced back to some of the most obscure places imaginable like the shores of the Galilee, dusty attics in the southwest, long demolished little brown buildings. This history belongs to a people who are on the move, faithfully seeking to pass on the greatest treasures they know to those not yet born.

Today, on this Easter morning, know there is more. We are The Church of the Open Door, are a progressive and inclusive congregation that seeks to be the breath of life in dark places, breath to witness Jesus Christ in a world of dark caverns and unfinished endings.

Today, we will not stop singing our Alleluia's, we will not stop sharing the words of our still speaking God, we will not stop, for, by the Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, we call upon the transformative power of the Holy Spirit which bears Gods courage, Gods creativity, and God's curiosity.

Today, we choose awe and reverence. With choose gratitude, exclaiming "Wow, what a treasure!", what a treasure we have in Easter. Today, we move from being an under-takers to a praise-makers. We are no longer sufficient unto ourselves! Love lies in wait! May the blank left at the ending be a new beginning filled with Resurrection glory. We are too big! For Jesus said "Do not be alarmed, I will see you there, just as I have told you, I will see you again."

Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia!
Amen!