

Manningham Uniting Church 31st March 2023

Easter Sunday

Text: Mark 16:1-8

Rev Swee Ann Koh

Introduction

Good morning.

“Where you there when they laid him in the tomb?” That’s where we left our story on Good Friday.

“Where you there when they laid him in the tomb?”

Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble.

Where you there when they laid him in the tomb?”

On Easter morning, when we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, I have to confess that it is hard to come up with something new every year. For more than 20 years, I have been using the Revised Common Lectionary. And for me every year, the world seems bleaker.

Right now, with more than thirty thousand dead in Gaza, our hope of resurrection must not simply be a hope for *after* this world. The people of Gaza need a cease-fire now. The people of Gaza, the people of Ukraine, the people of Sudan, Myanmar, India, and so many places in our world need hope now. The hell on earth needs to be defeated, now.

How can we preach the resurrection when there is so much starvation and death?

How can we preach good news when all seems hopeless for so many people in our world?

Where is the good news? Don’t get me wrong; I don’t intend my question to be a downer.

Today is a day of celebration.

I don’t know about you but frankly, there are so many things going on in our world right now that mitigate against believing that resurrection could have anything to do with us beyond a day 2000+ years ago when *something* happened.

It might surprise you that after what I have just said, maybe Mark 16:8 is what we need.

There is good news, but we may be running away because it seems so far-fetched. There is hope but we are hiding in fear because we don’t know what to say, or how to make it stop even when we scream at the top of our lungs.

Resurrection, as Jesus demonstrated from the empty tomb, is not about a far-off hope after we die. It is a new life, now. It is hope now. It is claiming a victory now, that death will not have the final word.

Now I don't know whether you are aware of this or not. The Bible has many stories about the resurrection, and about what happened, yet maybe they are not meant to be taken quite so literally.

Today we heard from the gospel of Mark, where the account of the resurrection ends much more abruptly than the others, with no appearance stories to follow.

The gospels of Matthew and Luke are more embellished with earthquakes and physical appearances of Jesus and all of them date more than 40 years after his death.

The earliest account is from Paul's writings. Paul has pride of place in these Easter traditions because his writings are the earliest text, 20 years after the crucifixion and after his conversion to Christianity. What he says points to something a bit different from the gospel accounts. His resurrection account is less concerned with the empty tomb but rather sees Jesus as having become a life-giving spirit at his resurrection. Not a physical body. For Paul resurrection involved transformation not resuscitation and included all who identified with Jesus.

There are real differences in the accounts. But between Paul and the Gospels, there was a great war, the Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 CE. Here Jerusalem and the temple were destroyed. As Greg Jenks says, *"both Jews and Christians alike found themselves picking up the pieces among the ruins of a world gone forever"*.

The gospels come out of that experience, and they reflect a new political and social situation long after the time of Jesus.

So, to say the stories are history is to miss the point. The writers were defining not just history, but who they were as human beings and as a society and as a feathering church, and this diversity, as can be seen.

So where does that leave us in the 21st century, you may ask. Like the Native American storyteller quoted by Marcus Borg, we may find ourselves saying: ***"Now I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true."***

Or as Dominic Crossan would say, you can believe in a raised physical body or a spirit or an empty tomb, anything you like really, but what is the meaning of it all?

What is the meaning of it all? The meaning of it is a transforming moment in our lives and the lives of the world in which we live.

Sometimes I chuckle to myself when I see earnest Christians trying to prove each other wrong. Those who believe in the physical resurrection of Jesus and those who don't.

From my observations, both sides can be equally bigoted and arrogant with their entrenched positions.

I think both sides miss the point. I wasn't there and neither was any one of you. As I have alluded to earlier there were different accounts in the Bible.

After reflecting on the various accounts of the resurrection story for many years what I can be certain of is this – a group of men and women (mostly men) went into hiding after Jesus was arrested and crucified, and one of the disciples denied him three times, were transformed into courageous disciples, who were prepared to die for him. They were transformed from fearful disciples to fearless disciples.

I don't know whether Jesus was physically resurrected or not. Several Biblical accounts indicated that. But something happened that turned their lives around.

Although Jesus predicted (more than once!) that he would be raised after being crucified, the concept is so incredible that nobody among his closest circle can fathom it. On this early morning when the sun had risen, the disciples are nowhere to be found.

"Now I don't know if it happened this way or not, but I know this story is true."

Once again, you can believe in a raised physical body or not or a spirit or an empty tomb, anything you like really, but what is the meaning of it all?

Now let's look at the Easter story from Mark's gospel.

Mark's Easter sermon goes something like this: *"Christ is risen! And they said nothing to anybody because they were afraid."* There is no encounter with the resurrected Jesus at the end of Mark's Gospel. Instead, there is a mysterious messenger who issues a promise and a command, plus an empty tomb, and a group of women who flee in terror, too frightened to speak.

Each of the other Gospels shares at least two pieces of evidence as proof that Jesus has risen from the dead: witnesses to the empty tomb and appearances of the risen Christ to multiple followers.

In Mark, the tomb is empty (apart from the messenger), but nobody gets to see Jesus or touch the nail holes in his hands. There is no great commission (Matthew), no recounting of

the Hebrew Scriptures or a meal shared with travellers to Emmaus (Luke), and no intimate conversation with Mary in the garden nor sudden arrival of the risen Christ behind locked doors (John).

Apparently, Mark's good news requires no resurrection proof based on encounters between Jesus and his disciples. Instead, there is a promise: "*He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.*"

Now the idea that a person would rise from the dead is as believable as the concept of a Messiah who gets crucified. It is no wonder that "*terror and amazement had seized them, and ... they were afraid*" (16:8).

Mark concluded his gospel with the bewildered silence of women who were too afraid to speak. But why? Surely Mark knew what profoundly good news this was. Surely Mark knew that these women did not remain silent forever – if they had, how could he have even written even verses 1-8.

Mark was not there in person, but *somebody* told him this story eventually and if it was not the women themselves, then it was someone (perhaps the Apostle Peter, who may have been Mark's source for this gospel) whom the women did tell. They did not remain silent. That much we know and can infer.

So why end the gospel in that silence? Maybe it fits a larger theme Mark is working on. One of the most striking features of Mark's telling of Easter is how it is framed by *motion*. The women begin in verses 1- 4 moving *toward* the tomb, and they end in verse 8 moving rapidly *away* from the tomb. Indeed, that last verse shows them almost exploding away from the tomb, hurtling outward like projectiles from the middle of an explosion.

Verse 8 is almost like some freeze-frame that catches the women in mid-flight. Picture them with eyes wide in surprised terror, mouths hanging open in shock, their arms outstretched like some sprinter racing for the finish line, their feet a blurry smudge of rapid motion. They flee the tomb, and Mark snaps a photo for us, freezing the action, showing the women in motion.

But in between this to-and-fro movement of the women is still more motion: Jesus is also on the go. The women arrive at the tomb and encounter a young man who says, "You are no doubt looking for Jesus." Yes, they were. Since he was, as the young man admits, "crucified," it made sense to seek Jesus in a cemetery.

But he's not there. "You just missed him," the young man as much as says. Why couldn't Jesus have waited!? Why do the women need to deal with a proxy, a stand-in, a substitute whose only purpose seems to be to tell the women that, indeed, they just missed Jesus.

He's gone on the road, moving right along to Galilee. "He's going ahead of you," the young man says. So, if they want to see Jesus, they need to get going once again themselves. Because for some reason Jesus did not hang around to be encountered at the tomb.

Easter morning, according to Mark, is not about running over to where we think Jesus is and then sitting down with him for coffee and conversation. Easter morning is not about throwing a party, or have Easter fruit buns, it's about Jesus in motion.

It's about our being in motion, too, if we hope to catch up with and so see him. The way of Jesus, according to Mark, is a way of mystery and paradox.

God's Messiah is crucified ... and yet he lives.

Terror and amazement silence the women ... and yet somehow (somehow!) the good news is proclaimed.

The disciples are nowhere to be found ... and yet they carry the ministry of Jesus to Galilee and beyond.

The messenger at the empty tomb issues an Easter command and promise: "Don't be alarmed," Jesus said this would happen.

"Look," Jesus was truly dead, as you can see from the place they laid him, but death cannot hold him.

"Go" away from this place of death and of endings and return to life and a new beginning. Then: "Tell" his disciples, even (especially!) the one who betrayed him, that he is going ahead of you.

You **will** see him!

Christ is risen, and this is only the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God. But in Mark, there is no Paraclete to comfort them (as in John), no fellow traveller to explain everything (Luke), not even the promise "I am with you always" (Matthew).

In Mark, the resurrected Jesus is not described as being “with you”. Instead, he is “going ahead of you.” If that is true, then death is stripped of its power. That’s the Good News of Easter. That’s the hope of Easter. There is nothing Jesus’ followers will endure, no place they can go, that Jesus isn’t already there.

*⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶But 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. ⁷But 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.” ⁸So 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 16:5-8)*

We see the silent and fearful women and exclaim, *“But the gospel can’t end in silence! There’s just got to be more to the story than this!”*

The Gospel cannot end in silence . . . Yes. Just so.

Perhaps this, then, is where we come in. “The Gospel cannot end in silence!”

Mark agrees, nods his head, looks at the reader and then as much as says, “I know. So, what are YOU going to do about that?”

Did Jesus live? What do our lives tell others?

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Alleluia! **Amen.**