

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
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Mark 16:1-8 (NRSV)

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.

EXPECTATIONS

I remember a poster with a picture of a sad looking little puppy dog. The caption read, "Blessed are those who expect nothing for they shall not be disappointed."

Expectations play a big role in how we act and what we believe. If our expectations are low we usually feel blue and don't have much pep. But, if our expectations are high we are filled with energy and optimism.

Last year my wife and I took a brief cruise. Carrollyn had been looking forward to that trip for a long time, and the week before we left she was on

cloud nine. She was so happy that she had a hard time sleeping the night before the trip. Her expectations changed her that week.

We all need to look forward to something. We need to believe that there is something or someone waiting for us at the end of the day.

I think about how my dogs act when I come home from work. Their ears are pinned back, and they literally jump for joy! They have been expecting me, and they are glad to see me. Each day I look forward to greeting my canine friends. There's something special about knowing there is someone waiting who will be happy to see you.

GRAVE EXPECTATIONS

Today's lesson from the gospel of Mark is about expectations, the expectations of the women who went to the tomb of Jesus long ago. But, their expectations were very low.

They didn't expect anyone to greet them when they arrived at the tomb. They expected a decaying corpse. They were paying their last respects to a loved one. They were doing the only thing they could do ... give Jesus a decent burial.

Many of us know what that is like, standing by the grave weeping bitter tears. There is this overwhelming feeling that we need to do something, but when it comes right down to it, there is nothing that we can do.

Once the funeral arrangements are made and the services are done there is a dreadful emptiness. We learn to live again, but it is never easy.

WHO WILL ROLL AWAY THE STONE?

The women talked about the stone that covered the opening to the grave as they made their way through the morning mist. It was huge. It weighed well over a thousand pounds. Who would roll away that stone?

But when they looked up the sun shone through the fog, and they saw something that they did not expect. The stone was rolled away.

We know who rolled away that stone. God rolled away the stone. God raised Jesus from the dead, and this was going to change everything.

But, the women who made the trek to the tomb that day did not know what had happened. The open tomb was not a cause for rejoicing but a cause for alarm. What happened? Who did this?

FEAR AND ANGELS

The courageous women continued on despite their fears. They made their way into the tomb and there they saw something that alarmed them. There was a young man dressed in a white robe sitting in the tomb.

This young man was an angel, and he had a message. He said, “Don’t be afraid. You’re looking for Jesus who was crucified. He’s not here. He has been raised. Look, here’s the place where they laid him.”

If this was meant to comfort the women, it didn’t work. Our Scripture for today tells us that they were so scared that they ran away and didn’t say a word to anyone. The expectations of the women would not allow them to accept the word of God’s messenger. The word “resurrection” was not in their dictionary.

We can’t blame them.

Before Jesus the word “resurrection” was not in anyone’s dictionary.

Remember when Jesus took Peter, James and John up a high mountain and on that mountaintop they saw his glory. Going down the mountain Jesus once again told his disciples what was going to happen in Jerusalem. He told them about his passion and crucifixion and how on the third day he would rise from the dead.

And the disciples were confused by that message. They talked among themselves as they made their way down that mountain. They asked in hushed tones, “What does rising from the dead mean?”

The resurrection is a totally unique event. Nothing like it had happened before, and nothing like it has happened since. It is the event that changes all our expectations and transforms all our desires.

And if we understand the message rightly, our first response should always be a sense of awe, a holy fear at the fact that the rules have been broken. Our expectations have been changed forever.

HE GOES AHEAD OF US

So what difference does it make that Jesus is raised? How does the resurrection change our expectations?

The angel told the women that Jesus was not there. Jesus was not in the tomb where they expected him to be. Jesus had gone on ahead of them into Galilee. It was all according to plan. It had all happened just as Jesus said it would happen.

And I think that this is the key phrase, the risen Christ goes ahead of us into Galilee. And where is Galilee?

According to my Bible dictionary, Galilee is nowhere special. It is not the center of political power. It is not the hub of religious activity.

No, Galilee is just where people live and struggle to survive. That dusty out of the way place is where most of Jesus' ministry took place, and now Galilee is where it would be reborn in an even greater way.

That's where they would find the risen Christ, and that's where we will find the risen Christ even today. He goes ahead of us into Galilee.

If you want to find Jesus, you need to know that he's not here. He's not in the cemetery. He's not in the sanctity of the holy temple or even in this beautiful church.

The risen Christ is on the loose.

All we see here are the signs he has left us.

The stone has been rolled away, and the tomb is empty.

If you want to see Jesus, you will have to go to Galilee. He told us that he would meet us there. He will meet us in the lives of common people doing the most ordinary things.

A CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

In Mark's gospel the resurrection is not just about eternal life in the great by and by. The resurrection is about a call to discipleship here and now.

He goes ahead of us, and he expects us to follow. More than that, he helps us follow him. His messenger tells us where to go and encourages us to leave our fears behind.

In Mark's gospel, from beginning to end, almost everyone is afraid and unresponsive to the message of Jesus. As we said last week Jesus is not the Messiah they expected. Indeed, that's why they crucified him.

But, the story does not end on the cross. Jesus was raised from the dead, and his ministry begins anew. The faithless disciples are given a chance to start over in Galilee. The one who died for their sins will meet them there. He bids them to come back home.

And he meets us there as well. Despite our failures, despite betraying the ones we love, despite denying all we hold holy, despite the fear that tempts us to abandon hope in God and in ourselves, God's messenger tells us that there is no reason to be afraid.

His story continues and so does ours.

God doesn't give up on us. He bids us go back to Galilee, back to where it all started. And there in Galilee we will find someone waiting for us; his name is Jesus.

COMFORT AND CHALLENGE

I was talking with a friend this past a week about my sermon idea, about how Jesus goes ahead of us. And he said, “That should be a powerful message of comfort for your people.”

And indeed it is a message of comfort. No matter where we go we are not alone. No matter how great the struggle there is always someone who goes ahead of us and prepares the way. Jesus will be there to greet us when we arrive on the other side.

Even when we face the end of our life we should not fear. Jesus has gone on ahead. He has conquered sin and death. He has suffered the worst that this life has to offer and has come out triumphant on the other side. He was crucified, but the grave could not hold him. And the promise is this; the grave will not hold his disciples either. One day when the final trumpet sounds he will come for us. His story will become our story.

That is a comforting message.

But, I pointed out to my friend that this is also a message of challenge as well. Sometimes we act as if Jesus were still in the grave. We come to anoint him and pay him homage to him for a life well lived.

But, we are unwilling to accept the fact that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty.

If He is risen as he said, then his Spirit is loose in the world even today. He is still going ahead of us and He is still bidding us to follow where He leads.

FEAR AND SILENCE

The women at the tomb were unable to do that. The Scripture tells us that they were amazed, they were afraid, and they were silent. Their worries kept these women from telling others the good news.

And I think that our worries often keep us from doing God’s will as well. Instead of focusing upon the Savior who goes ahead of us, we focus on the problems that surround us. Instead of focusing upon the promise, we focus upon the fear.

A while back I read about a woman who kept a “worry table.” It seems that she wanted to check the facts because she realized how much of her life she was wasting in almost constant worry. So, over a period of time, she came with these results concerning the things she worried about:

40% never happened

30% concerned old decisions she could not alter in any way

12% were due to criticism directed at her by others, mostly made by insecure persons, and having no validity

10% of her worries had to do with her health, which only deteriorated the more she worried and only 8% of her worries were legitimate in her eyes, for life does have some real problems.

How many of us let fear keep us from serving our Lord? How many of us are concerned about a stone that has already been rolled away?

Jesus goes ahead of us.

That is a source of comfort and challenge.

RESURRECTION CHURCHES

A small rural church in Pennsylvania had begun to go downhill. The congregation was becoming smaller and the building needed repair. In fact the sanctuary was so dilapidated that the town council told the church that it had to come down in the interest of public safety.

After much prayer, the small congregation made the agonizing decision to tear down the old sanctuary. Demolition began just before Christmas.

But, somewhere, somehow a building project began to go forward. Gifts, some of them very generous, came from many unexpected sources. Enough money was raised for the undamaged rear section of the church to be refaced and renewed.

And the gradual change in the building was accompanied by a subtle alteration in and among the members of the congregation.

The long faced defeatism of years gone by was slowly replaced by excitement and optimism. Inactive members and families reaffirmed their commitment to Christ. Mission outreach grew.

There was a resurrection of their commitment to Christian service. Their expectations changed along with their building. They began to believe that Christ was with them and was going ahead. All they needed to do was follow.

And that's what we need to believe as well.

This story reminded me of my state of mind after the hurricane. I was the first to arrive on the scene the day after hurricane Charlie.

Trees lay all over the parking lot, the metal roof on the steeple was flapping in the breeze and big water stains were on the beautiful woodwork in the sanctuary.

I knew that the damage was heavy and would be hard to fix. I must say that on that first day my fears were greater than my faith.

I just wanted to run away from the problem. I thought seriously about a start fresh in a new church where hurricanes weren't a threat, as if such a place really existed.

But, little by little things changed. We were able to put on a new roof with the insurance money. The leaks and the trim were repaired.

In essence, we were able to make the building look better than it has in a long time, maybe better than it has ever looked.

This past week we put the finish touches on the parking lot and the educational building, just in time for Easter.

I know that the church is not a building, but the restoration of this building has been a sign for me, a sign of God's providential care of the people who worship in this place.

RETURNING TO GALILEE

It's easy to believe that on Easter morning. We're all dressed in our finest duds. We all know the message and come expecting to be inspired by what we hear and see. I think that our positive expectations help make the Easter service special.

But, soon we will be going back to our old home, Galilee (or Kissimmee or St. Cloud or wherever ... it's all Galilee).

It is not so easy to believe when we return home to the drudgery of the same old same old.

The sun is shining now, but storm season is coming soon!
Will it be so easy to believe when the storm approaches?
Will it be so easy to believe when our lives are threatened by some great problem?

One thing is certain.
The struggle between fear and faith will continue.

And when we are discouraged, when it looks like all is lost, we need to remember the promise of the resurrection. Jesus goes on ahead of us, as he said. Jesus is faithful to his promise, and there is no stopping resurrection power.

After the storm, our Lord has plans to rebuild.
Our risen Lord has plans to begin the ministry again in the place where it all started.

We will have to run to catch up to him.

AMEN.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN