



Roanoke, Virginia

Easter During a Pandemic, April 12, 2020

***“For Thine Is the Kingdom, and the Power,
and the Glory Forever”***

Part VII of the Lenten Sermon Series, “Pray Then in This Way.”

Mark 16:1-8

George C. Anderson

Mark 16:1-8:

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. ²And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 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.

“When you pray, pray like this: **For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever.**”

The prayer Jesus taught did not have that last line. The line was added by the early church. Think of it as the church’s “Amen” to the prayer Jesus taught us.

That is why when we planned this sermon series on the Lord’s Prayer, we saved this closing line for Easter. After Jesus is gone—indeed after the tomb is discovered empty—the church picks up



where Jesus left off and begins by shouting, “**He is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah. Amen.**”

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That was a bit awkward, wasn't it? When I shouted, “**He is risen!**”, I heard echoes, for this Easter I am proclaiming the good news of the *empty tomb* in an *empty sanctuary*.

I don't want to pretend otherwise. Sometimes camera angles are used at events, political rallies and in filming movies to make it look like there are more people than there really are. We're not doing that. We're not pretending that today is like other Easters, when both services were packed and we opened the passageway windows for our overflow crowd.

I know many of you wish today was like those Easters. I would love it to be. Many of us yearn to be right here—

- to help decorate or see the Easter flower crosses,
- to enjoy the bright and colorful outfits some wear that not only celebrate Easter but the arrival of spring,
- to sing the Easter hymns (*Jesus Christ is Risen Today*),
- to hear together a sermon about hope and eternal life.

But we can't pack the pews this Easter.

We can't because of good theology, by the way. Good Christian theology doesn't deny truths about nature or the reality of death. We place an instrument of death, the cross, at the front of our sanctuary for goodness sake... for *Truth's* sake. “**Ashes to ashes, dust to dust**” is said in relation to many of our burials and cremations giving voice to the *biological reality* of God's created order. Christians have built so many hospitals and we at Second Presbyterian Church have been on so many medical mission trips because we accept the reality of disease and death and we want to help prolong and improve life as part of our witness to life in God. We are now physically apart from each other *because we care about each other*, and thus even apart, we *celebrate our life together* in Christ.

I'll also say that the few of us worship-leaders who are here in this empty sanctuary know that we are not alone. We've heard from so many of you that you have joined us online for worship. Indeed, last Sunday's Palm Sunday service had over a thousand views on YouTube (Yes, I check! It's my new way of checking worship attendance). So, even though I am looking over the top of empty pews, we know that there is a whole community out there with us. We do not feel alone. You are holding us up, joining us in ministry, praying for us and with us, reaching out to others on the church's behalf and we know it.

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Still, I don't want to miss an opportunity. There is symbolism here. We did not intend to engage in performance art or to offer our own version of a passion play, but in a way, that is what we have been *compelled* to do. We have moved from crowds gathered on Sunday mornings a couple



of months ago to an empty sanctuary. When Jesus rode a donkey into Jerusalem, the sides of the street were packed with people waving palms. But fear is contagious. Within a shockingly short time, the crowd is gone and only a few people discover an empty tomb.

I've embraced the empty sanctuary. When it became clear to me that our sanctuary would be empty on Easter, and that our worship would be online, I knew immediately which Resurrection text I would choose for the sermon.

- It would not be from Matthew's Gospel which ends with Jesus on the mountaintop telling his disciples to go into all the world.
- It would not be from Luke's Gospel which tells of Jesus being with his disciples in Jerusalem,
- It would not be from John's Gospel which ends with Jesus on the beach with his disciples cooking breakfast for them.

With those three Gospels, Jesus' disciples—his *church* if you will—are with Jesus. In a way, the church is gathered on Easter with Jesus.

I knew I would preach on the end of Mark's Gospel... the *original* ending of Mark's Gospel. Just as the early church tacked on an ending to the Lord's Prayer that was not originally there, so too did the early church tack on an ending to Mark's Gospel that was not originally there to make it more consistent with the other Gospels. The "Add-On Ending," verses 9-20 of chapter 16, has Jesus meeting up with the disciples again.

But I am preaching on Mark's *original* ending. You heard me read it to you. Three women—Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome—show bravery in bringing spices to Jesus' tomb so that his abused body might be properly buried. I say brave because they are not in denial. They have accepted that Jesus has died and *proactively* want to do something to deal with their grief. They want to treat his body with respect to reflect their love and their loss.

The tomb is a cave, perhaps carved out, and as they approach it, they wonder who will roll away the stone. Instead, they find the tomb open. More than open, they find it *empty*... at least as far as a grave would be empty in that there is missing a corpse.

They do find a stranger there who tells them: ["Do not be amazed, you seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. Go tell the disciples he is risen and he'll meet them in Galilee."](#)

And then how does the Gospel of Mark end?

The *women flee the tomb and tell no one anything*, for they are terrified. There is at the end of this Gospel no story of the church gathering together with Jesus, touching the wounds in his side and hands, hearing his instructions for how they are to be his body in the world. The Gospel ends with a stranger's announcement of good news echoing in an empty cave because the ones he was speaking to have fled.

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Mark is challenging us. Mark's Gospel ends with the community scattered, not gathered, as if this question needs to be answered: "Does the good news of the resurrection depend on the validation of crowds?" I have seen and you have seen how so much of what in our culture is believed and lived by is due to common consent... popular approval... the culture's embrace. Is faith acceptable *only when there is safety in numbers?*

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I think truth is joyous when affirmed by many, but also precious when affirmed by a few. Here is what I know about so many of you who are watching this worship service online. Right now, you might be like the one, two, or few people who encounter Jesus in *other* resurrection stories of the Gospels

- You might be watching this service by yourself,
 - like Peter is when the risen Jesus speaks just to him.
- There might just be two of you watching, partners in life,
 - just as there are two who are walking on the Road to Emmaus when Jesus joins them unrecognized, talks to them about scripture, and then joins them in their home for dinner where they finally realize who it is that is talking to him.
- Or there might be a group of you watching,
 - like the disciples who saw Jesus in a room, or on the mountaintop, or on the beach.

There are no stories in the gospels of Jesus and large crowds. There are no stories of him speaking in a crowded Temple or at a sunrise service before a huge crowd with people in the back asking, "What did he say?". That first Easter, Jesus is with one person, another time with two people, and other times with a gathering of disciples who barely exceed the maximum of 10 at a public assembly. But though they may not be with many others, they are with the risen Jesus who then tells them to find others.

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Was that the only Easter in which this was true?

Well, jump ahead to the people who first hear the Gospel of Mark read to them. The Christians of the first century live in a world of *Roman power* and *Greek culture*. They don't even have scripture to hold them up (Remember, Mark's Gospel is the first one written). The crowds are not with them, the culture has not embraced them. They do not gather to worship in large church buildings. Sometimes it is just too dangerous. Better to be safe and meet in small groups, most often in homes. But the Gospel story is told to them, they sense Jesus among them, and they embrace and live by this good news of a final victory over sin and death. They not only survive, but they live with purpose and some joy. They even end up thriving. Their faith and hope end up being quite contagious in a world wanting faith and hope.



Now jump to today. Here we are in the middle of a pandemic with its imposed isolation. We've worried about the spread of COVID-19 wondering how many more will be infected and how many more lives it will take. We know that there will be other impacts. Jobs are being lost, families will be stressed... there will be challenges we all have to face and sacrifices that we all need to make.

We don't deny this reality, it's there. But if we could roll the stone away from this tomb of anxiety and fear, we discover that death can't contain God. And a voice asks us:

“Why are you looking for God in this grave? Why are you looking in a grave for something that will have lasting power over how you feel about yourself, view the world and live your life? Why would you trust propaganda of death to dampen your spirits and rob your joy? You won't find Jesus trapped in this grave. You won't find Jesus trapped in the Johns Hopkins statistics of the spread of the disease.”

“The two Marys and Salome are right to be cautious, but they do not need to be reactive and be afraid. Keep the grave over here and be proactive. Go out, if not physically then in other ways, go out into the world you live in and find the risen Jesus. Yes, even in the midst of this pandemic, go find out how the good news that Jesus is risen is true.”

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So, if the risen Jesus is on the loose, where do we find him? What are the signs that he is risen?

Well, we have a guide. Those who have been worshipping with us through Lent have been working through the guide. The Easter affirmation of eternal truth at the end of the Lord's Prayer, “**For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever,**” invites us to go back over what it is that we have prayed for:

- We prayed to God in heaven whose name, which is Love, is to be honored.
Find the places where love, not hatred, is shown.
- We prayed for God's kingdom to come.
Find the places where God's kingdom is revealed on earth;
where kindness, compassion, justice and mercy are shown.
- We prayed for bread for today.
Find where bread is being given the hungry,
financial assistance offered to those who can't pay their bills,
masks are found for the caregivers,
and ventilators are found so the sick can have daily breath;
where medical care is offered despite risk of infection to the caregivers,
where daily calls are made to the lonely and isolated.
- We prayed to be forgiven and to forgive others.
Find where grace and forgiveness are at work,
where families are growing closer together in this unexpected time together,
where rivals are working together so the common good is served.



- We asked to be spared temptation.
Find where people are resisting the temptation to hoard and instead share,
resisting the temptation to find solace in blame
and instead purpose in joining in solutions
resisting the temptation to act out of selfish desires,
and instead show selfless acts of graciousness.

When people who can't visit, call others and send cards;
when employers do what they can for their workers until this time is past;
when neighbors are willing to check on their neighbors;
when cities share their resources with cities in greater need;
when countries reach out to help each other because it is clear for a moment this is the kind
of thing we can only get through together....

You've found him.

The risen Jesus is out in the world and can be found wherever

- there is commitment to each other in a time of separation,
- there is an affirmation of life in the face of death,
- of love in the face of hate,
- and hope for the future within an anxious present.

We are going to get through this. Yes, I'm talking about the pandemic.

But I am also talking about life. The real question is not if we are to live and if we are to die, *but how* we live despite the fact that we one day will die. We don't have to survive this any more than the early church needed only to survive. What we can do is follow its example and live with faith, with hope, with love... as a people who expect Jesus to be found whenever bread is shared, forgiveness is offered, and heaven's work of justice and compassion is done.

Jesus is risen. Let's find him, join with him, and *live*.

