

But by the Grace of God...

Sermon 94 | Greystone Baptist Church | April 4, 2021

Mark 16:1-8 & 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Very early on the morning after the Sabbath, three Galilean women set out under the cover of darkness to visit the tomb where their friend and teacher was buried. The events leading up to this moment had been brutal as this friend was arrested, convicted, and crucified all within a few days' time. There was a tremendous amount of fear that ripped through the community as the week progressed. Some abandoned the cause early, slipping away when things got a little rough. Others stuck around for the trial and conviction, but then disappeared in the shadow of the cross. But these three women were there for all of it.

According to Mark's Gospel the women were there from the very beginning. When Jesus begins his healing ministry in Galilee (Mark 1:31), it was a woman who became the first servant – *diakonein* in the Greek – the root of our word, deacon. Throughout the Gospel the women are there, serving in the background of the story, and here at the end, it is the women, *only the women*, who remain at the end. From their marginalized place in ancient society, the women embody one of the core principals of Jesus' message: *whoever wishes to become great, must be a servant of all.*

It is the women who continue to carry out the message of Jesus, even after the crucifixion. Whereas Peter has denied Jesus, James and John have hidden away with the others, and Joseph of Arimathea purchased linen, wrapped the body, placed him in the tomb, and sealed the entrance with a stone, the women buy spices, go to the tomb, prepare to anoint the body, and wonder about how the stone could be rolled away. The men in Mark's account had closed the chapter on Jesus' life and ministry, but the women were ready to open it back up. And they would re-open the story by doing what Jesus taught them to do: an act of service.

In other words, while the male disciples considered the story over, the women resisted its ending. Instead, they continued to find ways to live with faith in all that Jesus had taught them.

Who would roll away the stone? How could they once again be with Jesus? Where would they go from here?

Nobody knew. And still they went, faithfully, as disciples bearing witness to the life and mission of their teacher, their friend, their messiah.

When death draws near there is so little we know and understand. Often it feels like pure chaos as we are caught by grief we never knew we needed to plan for. When endings come and plans are cancelled, when nothing is happening the way we thought it might, or hoped it might, or had faith that it might... We find ourselves caught in a perpetual Good Friday, feeling abandoned by God and utterly alone. We find ourselves making decisions

we weren't ready to make, decisions about our future, how we will move forward... *if* we will move forward.

The last year has been characterized by grief.

First a global pandemic that forced closures of restaurants, storefronts, concerts, and sports arenas. Then the realization that any gathering that brought people together for any purpose at all was unsafe and should be avoided. We all responded by changing our rhythms of life and work, finding ways to do it all from home.

As a church, we adjusted as well, turning our traditions inside out so that the very things that were created to bring us together could be available on our own. Worship, Bible study, Communion, and prayer... all took on at-home forms as we (like everyone else around the world) began to live our life and our faith virtually.

As if this weren't enough, the sting of death has plagued our society as we have come face to face with systemic oppression in its many expressions. We have watched the poor and working class bear the greatest economic burden of this pandemic. We have seen the disparities in our healthcare systems exposed in new ways. And we have watched the streets of cities around the nation fill with people crying out for change, for racial justice, and still others demanding a return to the status quo. Some cry out "this is not who we are" while others insist "this is the truth about who we have always been" ... and in the midst of it all, the stench of death lingers, threatening the end of community and seeming to stamp out the possibility of peace.

Still, on top of all this, many of us have experienced personal losses. Loved ones gone too soon, either from the coronavirus itself or from other causes. As a church we have said goodbye to so many beloved members. Founding members, senior adults, whose lives have been made complete during this pandemic. Because of the precautions we have not been able to mourn and grieve the ways that we have grown accustomed to: drawing near to one another, sharing hugs along with stories, breaking bread together, and supporting one another in our shared grief.

This has been a year of pain and loss beyond all comprehension.

Like the disciples on Good Friday, on Holy Saturday, and early Easter morning we do not know quite what to expect.

In some ways, our journey to the church this morning feels a bit like the walk to the tomb the women took early that day, after the Sabbath. They expected to find things as they left them. After all, there hasn't been any activity there. Just a body left in a cave.

The women came that day expecting to do the traditional thing, they came to anoint the body, to respectfully prepare it for burial. But instead they were not met with the death they expected to find, rather they became the first to bear witness to resurrection.

Even though Jesus had told them that this would happen, the women were alarmed. What they saw with their eyes in the tomb that day was different from how they had imagined it. Resurrection was not a return to the way things were before. Jesus was different, he had gone on ahead of them. And now these women, the three true disciples who were with him to the end, they were called to go and tell the truth about what they had seen, to bear witness that resurrection had come.

Did you know Mark's Gospel has two endings? A longer one and a shorter one? The shorter ending happens here, in chapter 16, when the women flee the tomb afraid from what they have just witnessed. They do, however, tell the other disciples, and the "sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation" is spread through them to the whole world!

I love this ending because it leaves so much open ended, there is so much possibility, so much mystery. We, like the women approaching the tomb, never quite know how the stone is rolled away, we just know *that* it is rolled away. We don't know *how* resurrection came to Jesus, we only know *that* it did, *that* Jesus is alive. We don't quite know where Jesus' body has gone we only know *that* he has gone up ahead of us. We don't quite know *how* this will all play out, we only know *that* we are called to bear witness to what we have seen, what we have experienced, what we know to be true... that is where our faith comes in.

Like the apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthian church, we don't always know *how* or *why* God is working in us or around us, we only know that *by the grace of God* resurrection happens.

Even in the midst of this dire year, when death seems to loom closer than ever before, by the grace of God resurrection has been happening. Through expressions of love sent in the mail, dropped off on porches, and made possible through technology, hope has proven its resilience. Through vaccines and community distribution efforts there is a persistent little light that promises life has not been stamped out. Through creative minds and open hearts people are working together in new ways to learn about and address centuries-old systems that have excluded some and privileged others, offering a glimpse of hope, bearing witness to resurrection.

Sisters and brothers on this Easter Sunday, perhaps more than any other we have experienced before, we know with a deep and resilient *knowing* that resurrection has happened, is happening now, and will always happen because like the women heard first at the tomb, we proclaim today that the resurrected Christ has gone up ahead of us and has entrusted us to bear witness to the truth that Love is alive and it lives in us today as we persist in hope, as we push forward in faith, and as we refuse to give up on God just because things looked dire on Saturday.

Today we proclaim that Christ is alive, and that by the grace of God, Love will live through each and every one of us as we bear witness to resurrection with our hands and feet,

showing up and serving one another, and proclaiming that death will not have the final word. Hope endures and is making all things new.

Poet and artist Jan Richardson reminds us that [the women] have a decision to make. They have to choose whether they want to accept this calling, to go and tell, to bear witness to what they have seen. Maybe it would have been easier to pretend it didn't happen. To close the chapter and leave their vulnerable hope locked away.

But somehow in that moment, the women recognize that the empty tomb has been their destination all along. And we see, along with Mary, Mary, and Salome, that this tomb is not a place to stop. It is not the end toward which we have been traveling... but by the grace of God, it is the beginning.¹

¹ <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2018/03/29/easter-sunday-this-is-not-the-end/>