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## **“He is Not Here”**

**April 4, 2021**

*Mark 16:1-8*

*Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor*

*He is not here.*

Those words sound like Good News to our ears, and well they should, because they proclaim the Resurrection message. Christ is not lying dead in a tomb somewhere outside of Jerusalem, but is alive in our hearts and in our world, breaking forever the powers of sin and death. It's that Resurrection hope we proclaim on this day in word, song, and prayer.

But those words weren't initially good news to the women who went to the tomb that morning expecting to anoint Jesus's body according to the custom. They approached in quiet reverence, carrying balm in their hands and grief in their hearts, prepared to face their grim but loving task. When they arrived, they did not find what they expected. The tomb was open. Where Jesus's body should have been, there was instead a mysterious young man in a white robe, whose message brought little comfort in the moment. "He is not here." They were bewildered, dismayed, and frightened. According to Mark's gospel, they fled in fear, "overcome with terror and dread."

Over the last year, grief has been an uneasy companion, a presence made more malingered by inability to gather, travel restrictions, and other safety protocols. Loved ones suffered alone. Too many died alone. Funerals and memorials and family gatherings that would typically bring at least some measure of comfort and support were not possible; what small gatherings did take place were inadequate to match the need for remembrance, for human touch, for shared pain. Some elected not even to try, postponing arrangements until a future date – sometimes multiple times, or delaying them indefinitely. They're still waiting. It wasn't just a service that was pushed back, but the emotional processing that goes with it. I'm not big on the concept of closure – I don't think chapters of our lives are ever truly closed, much less the vital relationships that define them – but the frayed strands of loss and grief have remained exposed through this terrible season with nothing to soothe them but the thin veneer of time, the flimsy gauze of "maybe later."

The inadequacy of our attempts to process grief in pandemic leave us tangled in a complex web of attachment and loss. Mourners linger at gravesides longer than usual, uncertain what to do after the prayers have been said. There's nowhere to go – no lunch, no cookie reception, no gatherings in homes or restaurants to keep the stories going. The only thing to do is to face the painful reality. *He is not here. She is not here. They are not here.*

On this day 53 years ago, another nonviolent figure was cut down by violence on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. The millions who found inspiration in the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. were left to make sense of a world without him. How could they go on? What would the future of Civil Rights hold without his presence, his voice, his conscience, the one whose very being inspired hope and meaning in the face of overwhelming fear and despair?

Though *his* life had ended, life went on. The work was not yet complete. It still isn't. That chilly night in Memphis could have marked the end. Martin was gone, like Medgar and Malcolm and too many others before him. The attendants to the grave – Andrew Young, Jesse Jackson, Ralph Abernathy, John Lewis, Fannie Lou Hamer, James Lawson, C. T. Vivian, and others – faced a stark reality. *He is not here.* The finality of that realization also birthed a renewed commitment. *He's not here to lead us. It's up to us, now.* The mantle had been set aside. It was for those who remained to pick it up. And pick it up, they did.

Easter for us is a day of flowers and fanfares and finery. We color eggs and eat candy, surrounded by pastel decorations and chocolate bunnies and baskets lined with plastic grass. When we can, we gather with family and friends over elaborate meals served on fine china or at least on gussied-up tables. We're distanced from that first Easter experience by more than time and space. Where our observances are ordered and joyful, their experience was chaotic and dispirited. We celebrate because we know how the story ends. But do we live like we do?

Mark's ending is enigmatic because it is incomplete. The words stop, but the story does not. *He is not here. He is risen. Go and tell the others.* The first witnesses to the empty tomb ran away and told no one. But that can't be right. They must have told *someone*. What happened next? Mark's strikingly brief account of the Resurrection rings in our ears as unsatisfactory. No post-resurrection appearance. No doubting Thomas, no breakfast on the beach, no Great Commission. Just an empty tomb. *He is not here.*

How we approach the empty tomb today is a question of how we approach the pivotal moments of transition for all of us. Do we come expecting only limits, missing pieces, and dead ends? What happens when we're confronted with the reality that those we looked to for guidance and direction are no longer here? How do we go on? Is our work, our calling, our purpose over? Though we claim a Resurrection faith, we struggle to translate faith concepts to lived realities. It's *hard* to believe in Resurrection – to truly believe with mind and heart – when we're staring at a gravestone, a lost job, a broken relationship. We want to believe, but can we? Does this story we tell over and over again really change anything when loss is all around?

I love Mark's ending because, more than the other resurrection accounts, it speaks to our lived realities. There is no certainty, no physical assurance that everything will be okay. How the story goes from here is yet to be written. "He is not here" is either a pronouncement of the end or a call to action. That's as true for us today as it was for them then.

This Easter, the second of the pandemic, presents us with a choice. A year ago, we were optimistic that things would change soon, unable to fathom a summer of isolation, much less a Christmas without candlelight worship and parties and family bonding. Here we are, a year later, still waiting – waiting for a future every bit as uncertain. Some things *have* changed. We know more than we did – about the virus and about ourselves. Hope is on the horizon, though another wave of new cases is rising. Can we find the strength to keep caring for one another? Can we dare to dream of a future that is different from the past? Can we hold the losses we've been dealt in tension with a joy we long to grasp?

I have the audacity to stand before you today proclaiming Resurrection not because it wipes away the past or negates the pain inflicted upon us. The resurrected Christ who appears in the other gospels still bears the marks of violence and death. The disciples must still reckon with the memories of betrayal, denial, and abandonment. But the wounds are no longer mortal. The redemptive work of grace has been done, its effect only beginning to be realized.

We have the audacity to celebrate the Resurrection *together* because of the promise it holds for us. Even the hardened ground of the cemetery, the cold stone of the columbarium is transformed. *They are not here.* Truly, wherever they are, they are not here. Ashes are ashes. Dust is dust. Death does not need us to keep constant watch. We will see them again. But in the meantime, there is life to be lived, and it still holds joy for us. We don't remain suspended in time, waiting for someone to tell us what to do next. The grave is not the end. Death does not have the final word. Life will continue – not as it was, but yet filled with promise and possibility. In the words of Frederick Buechner, "The worst thing isn't the last thing."<sup>1</sup>

Mark's gospel ends inconclusively. *Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone because they were afraid.* Friends, we have felt pain. We have endured sorrow. We have stared into the darkness of death. But the tomb lies empty before us. What will we do? Will we remain here,

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner. *The Final Beast*. New York: Athenum (1965), 175.

trying in vain to hold on to what was? Will we run away in fear of an uncertain future and the transformation it requires? Or will we dare to hope, marching bravely and faithfully into a future that is yet to be written?

*He is not here.* The message that day wasn't about what had happened before. It was a summons. Christ was ahead of them, not behind them. Christ is still ahead of us, calling us to new life, new hope, new possibilities yet to be realized in him. It's time for us to go.

Let us pray: *God, life is really challenging right now. You know because you suffer with us. As we proclaim Resurrection this morning, let that message penetrate our hearts. Fill us with the hope that in Christ you have already won the victory over death. And help us to go forth as those who live, trusting in you to call us and guide us. In Christ we hope and pray. Amen.*