

Raised with Christ

Mark 16:1-8; Colossians 3:1-4

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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At the risk of stating the blindingly obvious, this is a strange Easter Sunday.

On a day where Christians joyfully proclaim that the tomb was empty, church buildings around the world sit empty.

This doesn't feel right. I'm sure that with the exception of a few extreme introverts among us (who are enjoying this whole church in your living room thing), most of us would rather be in church this Sunday.

We'd rather be shaking hands, offering hugs, sitting around tables eating Easter goodies, watching kids run around the sanctuary, singing songs, and proclaiming the good news of the risen Christ together, in the same physical space.

I suspect that I speak for many pastors, musicians, worship leaders, and technical folks when I say that we would rather *not* be recording Easter Sunday services on Good Friday or Holy Saturday.

But this is how Easter comes to us this year. This year, we greet the risen Lord at a physical distance from one another. We sing our alleluias in the midst of uncertainty about the future. We try to love our neighbours even as we keep them at arm's length.

This is hard, particularly because one of the central realities that defines us as Christians is that we believe in a God who *came* near and who *comes* near to humanity, a God who is experienced in tactile, concrete expressions of love from our neighbours, a God who refuses to keep distance from us.

This pandemic and all that it requires of us has pulled the rug out from under from all that seems familiar and predictable.

It has exposed the inherent vulnerability and frailty of the human condition. It has made us hungry for hope, perhaps acutely so on this Easter Sunday.

Exposed, vulnerable, hungry for hope. These words likely describe how the women who approached Jesus' tomb on that first Easter morning would have felt.

In Mark's account of the resurrection we get perhaps the best snapshot of the disorientation and fear that accompanied that first Easter.

Mark's is the "emptiest" account of the empty tomb in the four gospels.

There is no mention of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples, no "Bible time with Jesus" on the road to Emmaus, no breaking of bread with friends.

There is no granting of Thomas' request for proof, no miraculous catch of fish, no, "peace be with you" to disciples cowering behind closed doors.

The earliest manuscripts of the gospel of Mark end where our reading ended this morning. We are left hanging with the fear, the bewilderment, with the "not-knowing" of the women at the tomb.

The literal last word of Mark's gospel in these early manuscripts is "afraid."

Read on its own, Mark's telling of Jesus' resurrection doesn't feel very triumphant or victorious. It feels incomplete. There is hope, but it comes to us in fragments and hints.

The stone *was* rolled away (16:4). There *is* an angelic figure in white (16:5). There *are* words of comfort and promise: "Don't be alarmed... He's not here... He has been raised... Go, tell the others... you will see him" (16:6-7).

But it seems that the first witnesses can't take it in, can't even process what's going on. At least initially, the resurrection simply didn't compute.

Now, I hasten to add that thank God we do *not* read Mark alone—we *do* have Matthew, Luke and John to help fill out the story.

But even while the other three gospels tell the story in more obviously hopeful ways, all four versions of the resurrection and its aftermath contain disbelief, confusion, and fear.

In John, we have the story of doubting Thomas who refused to believe the testimony of others and needed to see for himself (John 20:24-29).

In Luke, the apostles thought the women were telling an “idle tale” and refused to believe (Luke 24:11).

In Matthew, even when the eleven disciples are on a mountain in Galilee with the risen Christ himself, it says, “When they saw him, they worshiped him, but some doubted” (Mat. 28:17).

If we were to patch together a kind of composite story of the resurrection of Jesus from all four gospels, we could be forgiven for thinking that the first witnesses were rather confused, sluggish, even *reluctant* participants in God’s great moment of triumph over evil, sin, and death.

The writers of the four gospels describe a hope that was thrust almost unwillingly upon its first witnesses.

The people who had seen Jesus executed on a Roman cross—even his very closest friends and followers—were not sitting on pins and needles until the third day thinking, “Will he or won’t he?! I wonder if Jesus will rise from the dead and conquer death?”

Despite Jesus’ predictions, nobody expected this.

The church of Jesus Christ was quite literally shocked into existence by the resurrection—by the stunned testimony of those first witnesses, who arrived at an empty tomb to honour a dead friend and departed with the fearful surprise of their lives.

And so, we come to the empty tomb all these years later. We come in the midst of a global pandemic that has brought the world to its knees. We come feeling vulnerable, uncertain, hungry for hope.

Perhaps we come needing to be shocked once again by this unlikely good news and emboldened to face whatever difficulties lie ahead with courageous hope and determined love.

There is much we don't know of what the future will hold for our church, for our nation for our world. But it seems almost certain that there will be hard days ahead.

Already, people are getting sick and dying. Already, there is massive unemployment with all the challenges that come with it. Already there is loneliness and despair at the prospect of more long months of isolation. There is not much good news in the air these days.

We will need a strong hope to get through what lies ahead. A hope that is not triumphant in a trivial way that minimizes human suffering or attempts to soothe it with religious clichés and platitudes.

But also, a hope that lifts our gaze from the trials of our moment—a hope that acknowledges the very real pain of suffering but insists with the Apostle Paul that “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19).

Earlier this week, Jen passed along a few passages from a collection of meditations for Holy Week from her PhD supervisor and friend Ellen Aitken, who sadly died of cancer in 2014. According to Aitken, Mark's account of the resurrection gives us precisely such a hope:

But Mark also wants us to trust that it is through Jesus' suffering and death that we see God most fully and it is through Jesus' death that we receive life... Mark invites us to honor, even treasure, the places of suffering and injustice, the difficult passages through which we have gone, the murky nights of the soul, our trembling and our tears—not simply to rejoice when we are on firm ground in bright sunlight. **We honor them not because they are right and good, but because they are places where God has been with us, though we may not always have known it;** we honor them because Jesus has knit them all into his suffering, redeemed them by his death. The crown of thorns has flowered upon Jesus' brow; his sorrows heal our own.¹

In Colossians 3, Paul tells the church that *since* we have been raised with Christ, we are to set our hearts and our minds on things above.

¹ Ellen Bradshaw Aitken, *Loosening the Roots of Compassion: Meditations for Holy Week and Eastertide* (Cambridge: Cowley, 2006), 45.

We *have been* raised with Christ. Now. This is not a future reality but something that has already been accomplished on our behalf and which we are to live in the light of in the present.

But what does it mean to set our hearts and minds on things above? Does it mean we're supposed to spend all of our time pining for some far-off heavenly future? I don't think so.

I think it simply means that the risen Christ's interests and priorities must be *our* interests and priorities. And the risen and exalted Christ's interests and priorities are the same as the ones that the human Jesus demonstrated during his time on earth.

To set our hearts and minds on things above is to be about what Jesus was about.

I think there are at least two convictions that ought to guide the life of everyone who has encountered the risen Christ.

The first conviction is that nothing good that we give ourselves to is wasted. Nothing we do to inject beauty, hope, kindness, care, truth, peace, and justice into the world is wasted.

No clinging to faith in the face of mockery...

No prayer offered in desperate need...

No song sung or garden tended...

No meal prepared or burden shared...

No tiny act of reconciliation negotiated, or peace pursued...

No unmerited mercy generously extended, no injustice courageously resisted...

No distance virtually bridged during a time of pandemic...

None of this is wasted, no matter how it might seem. Each one of these things may seem like feeble offerings. They may not feel like victory proclamations. But they are.

Because these are the kinds of things that Jesus did.

Because Christ is risen from the dead.

And because we have been raised with Christ.

The second conviction is that no suffering that we endure is final.

No financial struggle that seems overwhelming...

No disease that lays us low...

No tears for the violence, injustice, and destruction in our world...
No grief over relationships that seem broken beyond repair...
No doubts that threaten to crush us...
No fear for a future that we cannot understand...
No anxiety about the plague that approaches our door...
No terror of death, our last enemy...

Nothing terrible that we endure is final.

Terrible things hurt and we must not pretend that they don't. But they are not the end. None of these things represent the last word on your story or mine, or the story of the church, or the story of the world that God loves.

Because these are the dark places that Jesus entered into and suffered on our behalf.
Because Christ is risen from the dead.
And because we have been raised with Christ.

Again, I borrow the words of Ellen Aitken:

That... death could not destroy God and God's purposes is radically good news, because it means that nothing is outside the power of the resurrection. It means that the resurrection not only gives you and me eternal life, but that the resurrection is somehow at work everywhere.²

Resurrection *is* at work everywhere and at all times and all places. Even during a global pandemic.

In the end, all of the Christian life, wherever and whenever it is lived out, is nothing more and nothing less than a response to an empty tomb.

Like the women, like Peter, like the disciples, we, too, are witnesses.

We, too, are those who step out from our initial bewildered confusion and fear, joyfully scratch our heads and say, *Well, I guess nothing is impossible anymore. The rules of the game have changed because of Easter.*

² Aitken, 106.

So, on this Easter Sunday 2020, with Christians around the world, we declare that the tomb is empty. Death has been defeated. Fear has been swallowed up by love. The door to life eternal, in this world and the next, has been thrown wide open.

Let us walk through the door. With those first women at the tomb, with Peter and the disciples, with Christians down through the ages, with our sisters and brothers around the world.

Let us go confidently forth with hope into whatever God has called us to.

Let us see what resurrection has yet to show us.

Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed.*

Amen.

