

# Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by Rev. Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 12, 2009 Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

## The Rest of the Story

I'm glad you all are here today, although I don't know why you're here –  
Some of us are here because we were here every Sunday, celebrating all the little Easters between  
the big Easters.

Some of us are here, because this is what we do each Easter and Christmas Eve.

Some of us are here, because you were invited or expected to come.

Some of us are here because our children or grandchildren are singing in the choir.

Some of us are here because we've come home.

Some of us are here because we have to be here.

And many of us are here for more than one of these reasons!

But you know it really doesn't matter why you've come, because you're all going to do the  
same thing – celebrating the Good News of Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

Easter morning is the defining place and moment of Christian space and time. It is the Christian  
Genesis: Darkness becoming light. The first day.

Some of us have made an intentional journey through the season of Lent, which began at the end  
of February. And looking back even farther than that, a lot has happened in Jesus' life since he  
was born in Bethlehem 15½ weeks ago. There was his baptism and the time in the desert  
overcoming temptation. There were invitations to follow him and all those healings along the  
way.

There were wonderful moments with friends around the table, sharing meals and stories. Then  
there was this terrible last week where we watched him suffer the agony of his impending death,  
torture and mocking while on trial and then the public execution on the cross.

Following a death, it seems that there is both nothing to do and that there is much to do. First,  
there is nothing to do: nobody goes to work, nobody goes to school, nobody is hungry, nobody  
has anything to say. Helpers are helpless.

And then there is much to do: legal matters that need attention, people to greet, arrangements to  
be made, the body must be prepared for burial, a grave must be located.

Fortunately for the family and friends of Jesus, a nearby tomb had been donated by his friend Joseph of Arimathea who himself placed the body in the grave and rolled a stone against the door.

But that's not the end of the story. Because then, "on the first day of the week," everything changes. The women go expecting to anoint Jesus' body with perfumes and spices as was the custom of the day, since there'd been no time on Friday....

For them the story goes on, the death wasn't complete – more needed to be done. And they get there and – WOW! – not what they expected!

The end of the story here in the Gospel of Mark is actually quite a dud. This is not Cecil B. DeMille. This is not like the other stories of the resurrection in the Bible, which involve Jesus appearing to the women at the tomb, and their enthusiastic return to their friends to share this remarkable news.

Here all they do is run away in fear and go silent. At least that's all Mark has to say about it. And obviously that's not all that happened, because if they had actually told no one and if Mark's story was all we had, there would be no Christian church – it all would have ended then and there.

But this isn't only Mark's story, it isn't only the women's story or even the disciples' story. This is God's story, which has become the church's story, and on it goes even to today.

Notice that the women don't see the resurrected Jesus – they are only told about him. And that's pretty much how it is today – we don't see the resurrected Jesus – sure we say that he lives, but we don't see his resurrected body – we are simply told, "he is not here, he is risen."

Stopping the story here is a little like hearing a musical scale that's not quite finished....

We need the rest of the story. And there are people who did see Jesus after his resurrection. We get to hear from those folk in the readings next Sunday and for the next 6 weeks. I invite you to come back to hear these accounts; or go to a church close to where you live if you're from out of town.

Because the rest of the story is still being written...

The women were told "He is going ahead of you."

This is a message about the present – about now. God's activity did not stop at the cross, did not stop in the raising of Christ. He is still alive and active, still busy, still going ahead of us, blazing a trail for us to follow.

Whatever difficulties lie ahead, he is already meeting them before we do. He was betrayed, tried, persecuted, killed: we may be also. He was raised: so will we. Our faith is founded in a unique event in the past: "He has been raised." But it is alive in the present: "He is going ahead of you."

And while the story is still being written in the present tense, it is also yet to be written in the future. This is the promise – “There you will see him” our lesson says.

The resurrection of Christ means that even though Christ died, he has been raised. Life has triumphed over death. It means that the light at the end of the tunnel is God’s light and that it IS there even if you can’t see it – just keep going. Our own resurrection means that even though we die, we will see him face to face.

The Easter story gives us truth about the past, confidence for the present, and hope for the future. He has been raised; he is going before us; we will see him.

But it’s not so easy –the women in our lesson today clearly were afraid when confronted with this news. And like them, we live by faith, precariously balancing between the young man’s promise and the women’s fear and astonishment.

We want a happily ever after ending, only to discover that every ending that we try to write ends in disappointment. Although it may satisfy us for the moment, if we’re honest we know that it’s not enough.

Only in the drama of Christ, and not just the drama, but his actual death and resurrection do we find an ending, which is not ending, but rather a beginning.

A colleague of mine tells the story of discovering that her (at the time) 8-year old son had juvenile diabetes the week before Palm Sunday. He was hospitalized and they spent the week trying to keep it all together while learning about the dramatic changes their lives would take – insulin shots, dietary changes. And unlike type 2 diabetes, which can be reversed by diet or lifestyle, this was for life.

Exhausted and sitting in the church office before worship on Palm Sunday, while her husband and daughter had gone to the hospital to see if they could bring their son to church (he still had not yet been released), a new member, who would be joining the church that morning, happened to walk by and to ask, “How are you this morning?”

She responded, “You know what, I’m not doing too great. My son is in the hospital, diagnosed with diabetes, out of nowhere, and he may or may not get to come to church today. No, diabetes doesn’t run in my family, unless you count my great uncle, who I am just now remembering. He lost this leg to it in his thirties and died in his forties, leaving behind a widow and a little daughter. They say he never took care of himself, but how do you make someone take care of himself? So how am I doing? To be honest, I’m a little shaken.”

She goes on:

I realized that I had said more than I had wanted to say, and more than he, a new member, had asked. I think I remember saying, “Sorry,” as we careful people do when we are accidentally honest with one another.

“Juvenile diabetes or type 2?” he asked, evidently knowing a distinction that most people do not. “Type 1?” I nodded.

Well I have type 1 diabetes too,” he said. “In fact, it’s what inspired me to work in the medical field. I’m passionate about helping people to live healthy lives with this condition.”

I looked at this young man who seemed to have it all together – he was the picture of health, a person who had talked about climbing mountains and kayaking and who traveled the world. Suddenly my image of this disease had a new face, and I liked it a lot better than my late great uncle’s.

“I think that’s why I am joining the church today,” he said, and we both stopped to take that in. “I’m going to be a friend to your son, and help you deal with this.”

And that is exactly what happened. That young man’s friendship changed our lives in the years that followed, and none of that would have happened were we not joined together in the body of Christ.

On Palm Sunday, things change so quickly. The followers of Jesus move from triumph to tragedy in a matter of days. That’s how quickly life moves too. But as surely as the arc goes down as we begin the solemn services of Holy Week, we know that the arc will go up again on Easter. (Lillian Daniel, *Things Turn Around*, Christian Century, April 21, 2009)

Some resurrections are enormous and get recorded in scripture to be read about year after year. Other resurrections are smaller. They happen in the midst of ordinary lives. And we witness one another’s resurrections in church all the time. For my friend that Palm Sunday morning, what was resurrected was hope. As quickly as things change, they can change in all directions, as much as they do in Holy Week.

The good news of Easter is that pain and sorrow do not have the last word.

That suffering souls for whom pain is chronic, to whom even the coming of the light of dawn brings no help, can go on with dignity – worshipping God, caring about someone other than themselves, laughing at a joke, remaining faithful – is one of the great mysteries of our faith and a testimonial to God who raised Jesus from the dead.

“He is not here,” not in the tomb, the story is not over.

“He is going ahead of you,” always ahead of us.

And “you will see him,” in Galilee and in places we would never have expected.

He is going ahead of us, and of his story; there is no end.

Christ is risen!

He is risen indeed!

Amen.