

Sermon, April 4, 2021
Easter Sunday

Good morning. Christ is risen. This is Easter Sunday on Stay-at-home worship from St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Oakland, Md. I am pastor Scott Robinson, and today we welcome back Debi and Sean Beachy not only to provide special music, but to lead us all in singing our favorite Easter hymns together, even though we are still apart. The words to all the verses of the hymns were either emailed to you or can be found on the church Facebook or Webpage.

We are going to try opening the church next Sunday for limited in-person worship. Limited, because in order to establish and maintain adequate social distancing, seating capacity will be significantly reduced. We were advised not try that today, because demand would likely exceed capacity. And the last thing anyone would want would be to have to turn away members and visitors on Easter. To keep that from happening next week, we ask that you call ahead to make a reservation of sorts, telling us you want to come and how many family members will come with you. Call the church office to do that, at 301-334-2668. If you leave a message, be sure it includes your name and number.

If you do happen to get closed out, you will be given priority the following week. The online service will still be available each week, but it will not be posted until Sunday afternoon.

To meet CDC indoor gathering guidelines for ventilation, the church's windows will be at least partly open next week. Dress accordingly. Be advised, this is all new to all of us and we are "winging it." If we get something wrong next week, we'll fix it by the next week. We will continue to monitor local covid 19 positivity rates. If we need to shut down again to be safe, we will. But only as needed.

Now today's stupid joke. I told you last week about my pastor friend who is in trouble with her bishop. Apparently, it didn't get any better this week. He summoned her to synod headquarters, and when she got there, he was alone in the office, holding a folder and staring at the paper shredder. She asked, "Is something wrong?" He said, "The secretary left early today and I have a very sensitive document here. Do you know how to work this thing?" And she said, "Sure," and she took the paper, fed it into the slot and pushed the shred button. And then he said, "Thanks so much. I just need the one copy."

Hymn Jesus Christ is Risen Today

Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia. Let us pray. O God, you gave your only Son to suffer death on the cross for our redemption, and by his glorious resurrection you delivered us from the power of death. Make us die every day to sin, so that we may live with him forever in the joy of the resurrection; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, Amen.

A reading from Acts of the Apostles, the tenth chapter.

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ--he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him.

We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who

were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead.

He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

Here ends the reading.

Hymn Alleluia! Sing to Jesus

The Holy Gospel of the Lord, according to Mark, the sixteenth chapter.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint [Jesus' body]. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?"

When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But 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. But 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." So 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.

The Gospel of the Lord

Let us pray. God of wisdom, may your word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Amen

I know what you are thinking—why did I stop there? It IS Easter after all. And you probably want to hear the part where the risen Jesus revealed himself in the cemetery to Mary Magdalene, who (ha ha!) didn't recognize him and thought he was just the gardener. Surprise!

Or that touching scene on the road to Emmaus, where two disciples also didn't recognize the risen Jesus until he broke bread with them; and then he vanished into thin air! (Now THAT's an Easter story.)

Or how about the one where the risen Jesus popped-up out of nowhere in the locked-up room with all the disciples and Doubting Thomas? Or my favorite-- the time the disciples went fishing, and lo and behold, the risen Jesus was there on the lakeshore cooking breakfast for them over a charcoal fire.

Problem is, this is the MARK year in the Revised Common Lectionary of prescribed scripture readings, and it turns out the original Gospel of Mark didn't tell ANY of those stories. In fact, in the earliest versions of Mark, the risen Jesus never appeared at all.

Mark's story originally ended just where I did. With that mysterious young man telling a group of women to spread the word that Jesus had been raised, but they instead got scared and went home without saying a word to anyone. Not much of an ending, is it?

In fact, Mark's non-ending of an ending apparently disappointed folks in the early Church so much that they added several different endings to the original, beginning sometime in the second century. One of those is a short ending of Mark, which biblical scholars refer to as the "short ending of Mark."

The other ending commonly printed in today's Bibles is longer. Anyone want to guess what scholars call that one? The long ending of Mark.

In the short ending, the scared and silent women finally did relent and told Peter and a FEW other disciples about the empty tomb. And who knows? Maybe that IS exactly what happened. Obviously somebody blabbed. Why else on most Easters would the parking lot and the pews be pretty much full, And why else would the choir, handbell choir and brass ensemble be with us Easter morning, which if it weren't for the pandemic, they would be today?

The long ending of Mark adds twelve more verses to the original gospel, borrowing stories of the risen Jesus from Matthew, Luke, John and even the book of Acts. But those verses are clearly not written with the theological slant or in the style of Mark. Those extra verses also include some weird notion that you can handle venomous snakes and drink poison, yet somehow not be harmed if you are a TRUE believer. Please folks: DO NOT TRY THIS AT HOME!!!

The other striking thing about this original non—ending is that, although most English translations smooth it over, in the original Greek Mark seems to end his gospel in the middle of a sentence. The last word is $\theta\alpha\rho$ -a Greek word that means something like, “because” or “since” or “for.” So the last line of Mark's original Gospel essentially reads, “terror and amazement had seized them, which is why...” Why what?

Theories about the mysterious non-ending of Mark abound. Some think maybe the original scroll was torn and the end was carelessly tossed away. Or perhaps it was first written as a codex, or book, and the last couple of pages fell out.

Some wonder if maybe Mark just hadn't heard those Risen Jesus stories yet. After all, Mark was writing long before the other gospels or the Book of Acts.

But then again Paul wrote up to twenty years before Mark, and he seemed to know all about the various appearances of the risen Jesus. Certainly Mark had heard those stories too. God forbid, what if something terrible happened to the author of Mark before he could finish his book?

Yet another group thinks the author of Mark intended all along NOT to write a big finish for his story. And I'm thinking maybe they are right. That's certainly what the late New Testament Scholar Rev. Dr. Lamar Williamson had in mind about Mark, when he posed the question, "When is an ending not the end?" In other words, maybe Mark's author had no intention of writing an ending for the Jesus story, because he knew full well the story of the Risen Jesus...wasn't over!

Sure, Mark's gospel was probably first put to paper forty years after the fact; still, maybe the author didn't want the story of the risen Jesus simply to be relegated to the past. He knew it didn't end on a road, in a cemetery or a locked room; or even on a mountain top in Galilee, or for that matter, earlier today.

The way the mysterious young man at the tomb explained it, the risen Jesus goes on ahead of his followers. He'd meet up with them in Galilee, which was home to most if not all of the disciples. The events in Jerusalem were over now. But the story was not. They were not going home alone. The risen Jesus was going with them.

And you know, that's just the sort of message Mark's first readers would have appreciated as much as we do. Theirs were days of difficult and sometimes bloody persecution under the likes of an emperor named Nero, who according to tradition had imprisoned and executed both Peter and Paul, along with many other Christians. Would some of Mark's first readers face the same fate? Possibly. But they wouldn't face it alone.

What if Mark's immediate audience would be pressured to deny they even knew Jesus in order to save their own skins? You know, like Peter—the guy who most famously had denied Jesus three times even before the cock crowed twice?

“Tell the disciples AND PETER that Jesus is going ahead of them...” said the mysterious young man. Clearly all was forgiven. Meaning both then and now, even when we, like Peter, also deny and disappoint the risen Jesus, he's not one to deny or disappoint us.

Because the miracle of the risen Jesus is NOT over. It is not confined to the past, even the holy past of Easter morning. The risen Jesus continues to make appearances in our lives, even though WE don't always recognize him either; be it here in church, in locked rooms, funeral homes, hospitals, nursing homes, homeless shelters, cemeteries, on mountain tops or even by a charcoal fire on the shore of the lake.

When we head home this morning, we too will not be traveling alone. The risen Jesus of the past remains the risen Jesus, who is available to us throughout this day and all our days ahead; even in, and in fact especially in, those days when we struggle and need him the most.

Where is Jesus in the midst of the life's trials and sufferings and even death? Exactly where we hope he will be. Both here with us, and as the mysterious young man pointed out—way ahead of us.

So when is an ending not the end? Dr. Williamson said an ending is not the end when a dead man rises from the tomb, and a gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!

Let Christians Sing Hymn Christ is Alive

Special Music

Prayers

Hymn The Day of Resurrection

Benediction

Hymn The Strife is O'er, the Battle Done
