

“Resurrection Hopes”
Easter Day, April 4, 2021
Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; Mark 16:1-8

Did that ending sound a little...abrupt? Mark's gospel is sort of an outlier when it comes to resurrection stories. There are a lot of scholars who are absolutely convinced, just hanging on for dear life, of the idea that there's some lost ending to it. But really, these women are the only ones in the gospel who do what Jesus keeps telling others to do: "Tell no one anything." Secrecy is a theme in Mark's story. Jesus wants to keep everything under wraps.

I suspect there's a reason for that. I think Mark is writing for a group of people who are sort of on the fence about all this. Maybe they've been together a while, expecting big changes to the world, and so far nothing's happened. Or, worse yet, maybe they thought life would get better for them when they became followers only to discover that following Jesus tends to make life harder. When you become more intentional about your actions in the world, more aware of other people's hardships, life really doesn't get easier.

It would be easier if we could ignore other people's pain. It would be easier if we could live blissfully unaware of how our actions can hinder other people's progress. Followers of Jesus do not have that luxury. It makes me wonder if maybe the women who went to Jesus' tomb were sort of relieved that it was all over. They could finish things up, neatly care for his body and tie it all up with a bow...and then go back to their lives. Resurrection won't let them do that. Once we've been exposed to hope, it's not possible to go back.

That's a reality I hear expressed over and over in the Bible. No matter how low the people of Israel are brought, no matter what horrible ordeal they go through, God always confronts them with hope. They're not allowed to wallow in sorrow or let their disappointment define them. They're not allowed to live in bitterness or anger. As Walter Brueggemann says when writing about this passage from Isaiah: "Biblical faith is not a moral system; it is not a mode of holding on or staying in control. It is rather an act of yielding in the present (as this poet does) to the assurance given for God's future." In other words, Biblical faith is defined by hope.

When faced with the hope of resurrection—"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here."—the women are overwhelmed. They can't imagine a world where such hope can live. It frightens them and they run; just like the men who are frightened and in hiding. The hope of resurrection is too heavy for them to bear.

I think the question Mark is asking the people he's writing this for, and across millennia asking us, is, "Can *you* bear the hope of resurrection?" Are we willing to settle for a world where death always wins? Are we satisfied living under a cloud of oppression and fear? In Isaiah, we're told God "will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations." The image is the pall that's used to wrap up a dead body for burial. The poet-prophet Isaiah evokes the image of a world of the living dead. Is that really the world where we want to live? Are you really willing to settle for that?

For the God of Israel, it's not enough. God refuses to accept a world where death always wins. Even though we find that world more predictable and more comfortable and secure, God will not accept it. And neither should we. We are created to hold out for hope, for resurrection hope. The news the women find at Jesus' empty tomb is the fulfillment of God's promise to swallow up death, wipe away the tears from all faces, to replace sorrow with joy, despair with hope.

But they run away, afraid. So, spreading this hope is up to us. We hear the news just like they do; we know the tomb is empty, and now we have a choice. How can we share resurrection hope? It begins, I think, with a willingness to reject everything we've learned up to now about how the world is supposed to work. If death is no more, then maybe poverty should be no more; maybe hunger should be no more; maybe abuse should be no more. Because Jesus is risen and death is swallowed up, we're no longer obliged to accept a world where the weak and vulnerable are left out. We're no longer obliged to settle for a world where people of color are given second-class status. We're no longer obliged to keep our mouths shut when LGBTQ people are denied housing or healthcare. We're no longer obliged to sit on our hands while gun violence continues to escalate. Because we have been exposed to resurrection hope, we can envision a new world for all of us.

Living under the influence of resurrection means we see the world with hope-filled eyes. On the edge of every hardship and injustice we see the possibility of redemption and reconciliation. Where others approach the world with fear and suspicion, we approach with acceptance and compassion. Resurrection hope changes us by filling us with the promise that death will not win. And that's a promise we must not, we cannot, keep to ourselves. So, while Mark's gospel ends abruptly in fear and silence, ours is begging to be shouted from the rooftops. Christ is risen and there is hope for this world! It lives in us and it's up to us to reveal it in every way we can. I read once somewhere that faith is always personal but it's never private. It's not something we're meant to keep to ourselves. If you have been exposed to resurrection hope, then you need to share it with the world and stop settling for death.

Let's get to it! Let's start living! Let's shout to the world, Christ is risen and all the forces of hatred and fear, of inequity and oppression are done. God is wiping the tears from all our faces and hope has finally won.

Amen