
Time to leave the tomb
Martin Grove United Church
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Based on Mark 16:1-8

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! How wonderful it is to say those words. Those cherished words of hope. Those comforting words of faith. Since the days of the early church, Easter has been the most important and most celebrated event of the church year. In fact, Easter was the most popular Christian holiday even before the creation of the Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs, if you can imagine that. Well of course Easter is important to Christians. Who would imagine otherwise? Easter is the key event that led to the creation of Christianity, right?

And yet, when we read the Easter texts as we have just done - the stories of the resurrection of Jesus - they don't seem particularly - powerful. They don't seem like words that could launch a new religion. For example, we just read text from Mark - which is in fact the original ending of the gospel of Mark. And yet, it's hard to see the text as anything particularly inspirational or motivational. The women disciples come to the tomb wondering how to deal with the stone that sealed the tomb. They speak with a "young man" who tells them that Jesus has risen, and the women run away in fear. Does that sound like the type of inviting, inspirational text you could use to build a new community of believers, let alone a new world-beating religion?

When we read those words today, we read them through a lens that is 2000 years thick. That lens includes interpretations by the "Church fathers", and important religious events including the inquisition, the crusades, and the reformation. That lens includes social transformation including the evolution of democratic society, globalization, and the rise of rampant capitalism. It is easy to feel removed from the words in our text. And in particular, it is easy to forget that those words - when they were first spoken - described a time of great fear and uncertainty. For us, the words are comforting and affirming. For the disciples, 2000 years ago, the words probably caused the hair on the back of their necks to stand up.

The resurrection texts - for all their mystery and wonder - contain feelings of great uncertainty and fear. There were very few witnesses to the resurrection, and the witnesses who were present were not believed anyway. Remind me - why is Easter so popular?

I think there are at least 2 answers to that. One answer is that the Easter event as crafted by the early church was seen as very theologically important, and so services around Easter took on a great deal of meaning. The fact of the resurrection was important - more important than the event itself. The event of resurrection as described in scripture was perhaps unimpressive, but the meaning of the resurrection gave the church something concrete that they could build on. The meaning of resurrection is what the church grabbed a hold of and is what allowed them to expand into a global reality. And of course, given the dominance of Christianity during the time of Christendom, many other symbols became associated with Easter – like bunnies and chocolate and eggs, thanks be to God for that!

But the other reason that Easter is important is because of what happened after the resurrection event. At the crucifixion, Jesus died. But after the resurrection, Jesus kept appearing to people in various forms. First to the women, then to some of Jesus’s closest friends, then to all of the disciples, and then to other people. And that whole trend continued right up to the Ascension, and then Pentecost, at which time the spirit of Jesus touched everybody. Understood that way, Easter is not the big event theologically and spiritually. The big event was that *after* Easter, the spirit of Jesus was felt and experienced by many many people. That is what enabled - and still enables - the church to grow. It is the abiding feeling of the spirit of Jesus that allows the Christian faith to have meaning today.

In other words - Easter is not the end of the story after all.

In fact, Mark sets the stage for this understanding right from the onset. In Mark chapter 1, verse 1, Mark introduces his gospel with these words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” But there is nowhere that Mark ever writes, “and now, this is the end of the story”. Mark’s final words are the beginning of another story - a story that continues today. I realize that we have been on a journey called

“Lent”, and I realize that the journey has been leading us to Easter. But in spite of that, Easter Sunday is not the end of the journey.

Imagine - if you will - the original Easter Sunday. Imagine being in the tomb with Jesus. Imagine the stone door being rolled away. Imagine Jesus saying, “you know, I think I'm just going to sleep in. Last time I walked around Jerusalem it didn't turn out too well. I don't want to be attacked and crucified again. I think I'll just stay in the tomb where it's safe. I've been resurrected, and that should be good enough. Haven't I worked hard enough already. My resurrection proves God's power whether or not I leave the tomb. There is nothing more for me to do anyway.”

Imagine that. Imagine if Jesus had stayed in the tomb ... if the resurrected Jesus had stayed in the tomb. I don't think the Christian enterprise would have gotten off the ground - in spite of the resurrection. The critical point about the resurrection was that it was *not* the end of the story. Jesus had to leave the tomb. Jesus's spirit had to touch lives. The spirit of Jesus has to keep touching lives. Christian faith is not defined by our past. It is defined in our present, a present where Jesus keeps touching our lives. Resurrection was not enough. Jesus had to come out of the tomb.

And when the resurrected Jesus came out of the tomb, notice that things did not go back to “normal” for Jesus or the disciples. Jesus and his followers did not go back to the “good old days”. The body of Jesus entered the tomb, and the spirit of Christ left the tomb. And then, that spirit spent time with the disciples and then ascended. Leaving the disciples to take the Jesus community on a new path, in a new direction. The resurrection was not about bringing new life to Jesus's dead corpse. The resurrection was about bringing new life to the disciples. And today, the resurrection is not just about what happened to the body of Jesus 2000 years ago. The resurrection is about us finding new life on new paths today. But that will only happen if we ourselves are prepared to leave the tomb.

And so - on Easter Sunday - each of us is invited to leave the tomb. To leave the quiet, security, and safety of a closed world and to enter into a loud, insecure and risky world ... the world of real life.

We are invited - not to go back to the “good old days”, but rather we are enticed to

move forward, into “good new days”. We are invited into our future, not our past.

We are invited to continue the journey. Lent is now over, but our journey continues.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.