
Time to leave the tomb
Chapel in the Park United Church
March 31, 2024
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

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 invention of the Easter bunny and chocolate eggs, if you can imagine that. Well, of course Easter is important to Christians. Who could imagine otherwise? The resurrection of Jesus is the event that led to the creation of the Christian Church, right? Well - yes and no. But mainly, no.

We just read the complete resurrection story from Mark. In summary, the women disciples go 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. That is the original ending to the Gospel of Mark. 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”. That lens includes important religious events including the inquisitions, the crusades, Christendom, and the reformation. That lens includes social transformations including the evolution of democratic society, the colonization of North America, industrialization, modernization, post-modernization, globalization, the rise of rampant consumerism, the information age, and our current ventures in artificial intelligence and natural stupidity. 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 in Palestine, the story in Mark 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 again - why is Easter so important?

I think there are at least 2 answers to that. One answer is that the Easter narrative was crafted by the early Church to be theologically important. The event of resurrection as described in scripture was perhaps unimpressive. But the theological meaning that the Church injected into the resurrection story gave the Church something concrete that they could build on. Which is why the gospel of Mark was extended with 12 extra verses (verses 9-20) around the year 200. Those verse have Jesus calling on the disciples to build the church. But of course, those words were written by the early church, not by Mark.

In the early days of Christianity, the meaning of the resurrection was much more important than the event itself. The meaning of resurrection is what the church grabbed hold of and is what allowed it 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 chocolate bunnies and coloured eggs. Thanks be to God for that!

The main 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. As written, first to some of the women, then to some of Jesus's closest friends, then to all of the disciples, and then to other people. And then Pentecost the spirit of Jesus touched everybody. Understood that way, Easter is not the big event theologically or spiritually. The big event was that after Easter, the spirit of Christ was felt and experienced by many people. That is what enabled - and still enables - the church to find meaning. It is the abiding feeling of the spirit of Christ that allows the Christian faith to have meaning today. The spirit of love. The spirit of acceptance. The spirit of inclusion. The spirit of peace.

So 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, “here endeth the story”. Mark’s final words - the ones he actually wrote - 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. And I'm sorry if you feel that I misled you. But I did. Easter Sunday is not the end of the journey. In fact, if Easter Sunday was the end of the journey, we might wonder what the point of the journey was.

If you don't believe me, please join with me in a simple thought experiment. Imagine - if you will - being present on the original Easter Sunday. Imagine that when the body of Jesus was being placed in the tomb, somehow you were left in the tomb too. You are sealed into the tomb with the body of Jesus. And the last time you saw Jesus, he was dead.

Live into this moment. Feel the damp, the cold, the dark. You shiver. Be present in the tomb for a moment. ... You hear strange noises and you slowly come to realize that the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb is being rolled away. You blink in the dim but blinding light. You smell fresh air. And in the dim light you look around the tomb and you realize that Jesus is not dead. You say, “Hey Jesus, you’re alive! Let’s go find the disciples. They are probably at Tim Hortons right now. Let’s go meet them. I’ll buy!” Now, 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 arrested 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. My resurrection proves God’s power whether or not I leave the tomb. There is nothing more for me to do anyway. You go and have a good time. And please bring me back a Canadian Maple and a small double double”

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 by our present, a present where Jesus keeps touching lives. Resurrection by itself is not enough. Jesus had to leave the tomb.

And notice that when the resurrected Jesus came out of the tomb, 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 physical 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 corpse. The resurrection was about bringing new life to the disciples. And today, the resurrection is not about what happened to the physical body of Jesus 2000 years ago. The resurrection is about us - the disciples - the body of Christ today. Resurrection is about us finding new life today. And that will only happen if we ourselves are prepared to leave the tomb.

Well what is Rev Paul talking about now. We are not in a tomb, are we? Well for most of us, we likely are. And I mean this on an individual level as well as on a congregational level. I also know that this is not the first time we have been invited to leave a tomb.

I know this because all of us were - not long ago - hiding in a tomb called “the pandemic”. For all that the pandemic was a pain, I have spoken with many people who (after the initial shock wore off) found the pandemic to be a place of comfort. It was peaceful. Most of us retreated into our own homes and into our own lives. We stopped having to put up with strangers. We were safe, secure, peaceful. For many - not all - people the pandemic was a time of calm and peace.

And about 3 years ago, vaccines rolled away the stone that was keeping us captive in the pandemic tomb. And we were finally free to leave that tomb.

And what happened? Many of us celebrated and emerged from the tomb with energy and joy. But let’s be honest. Some of us have largely decided that we are ok with being more isolated than we were before the pandemic. We like the safety and security of our own space. We find it much safer to only interact with people that we already know. Many people never completely left the tomb of the pandemic. This was not unique to the church of course.

And now - in 2024 - is there a tomb that we are still in? Is there a place we hide in to avoid the concerns of the real world? What tomb are we invited to leave today here at Chapel in the Park United Church?

You will all be relieved to hear that I don't know. Yet. As of today, we have only been together for 4 months. I don't know you and our community well enough yet to tell you what tomb we need to leave.

So today - I will have to rely on the vision of others. Fortunately, our Moderator, Carmen Landsdowne, recently shared a piece¹ in the magazine Broadview that has some wisdom for us. And my thanks to Janet Bell who pointed out the article to me. The article is entitled "How Easter makes me rethink the Church's role in justice". The online version is from March 26.

Carmen started a project in the church called "Flourishing: Bold Ideas, Daring Connections Project". It's not about strategic planning. It's about discussing the kind of future that we want for ourselves, our church community, and our country. Which means that Carmen hears from many United Church members across the country.

And one of the things that she names is a tomb that we need to come out of. The tomb of wanting to live in the past. The tomb of wanting to re-create the church of the 1960's full of children, full of activity. The tomb of wanting the future church to look exactly like the church of the past. And that is a tomb for the simple reason that those things are NOT going to happen. Wanting to live in the past means choosing to stay in the tomb.

What would it mean to leave that tomb? It means imagining a church that is allowed to grow, change, and be different from our own expectations. Impossible you say? Are you seriously telling me that you believe in the resurrection of Jesus but you do not believe in the reinvigoration of the church? Really?

Another comment that Carmen names - which I have heard myself many times in churches - is that we want to welcome new people. But in a variety of ways what we really mean is that we want people to join us and become like us. To be blunt, we want more people like us in the church. Not more people if they are different. Wanting new

¹ <https://broadview.org/church-justice-inclusive/>

members to be like us means staying in the tomb of our past - just with more people in that tomb.

What would it mean to leave that tomb? It's simple really. We just need to allow people to bring themselves - their whole selves - into this church. We need to welcome people as they are.

Carmen said it this way, "We are so good in the United Church to proclaim: 'All are welcome here. No matter who you are, no matter where you are on life's journey, no matter who you love, you are welcome here.' That is beautiful. And for much of our recent history, it has been prophetic. But the implication is that you are welcome to come and be like us. The truth is that many communities of faith still have a long way to go in becoming genuinely inclusive."

"To get there, to envision a ministry that is alive and thriving, we need to relinquish control and expectation, and leave space for dreaming and feedback." You might say we have to leave room for the spirit. And we have to make space for new people in the church to bring their whole selves in the door and we need to honour their dreams alongside our own dreams.

This sermon is already a bit long for Easter Sunday. But let me briefly touch on the personal side of this. On a personal level, we get stuck in tombs. One way to recognize a tomb you may be in is by looking for a stone that is a barrier to your freedom. Stones can take many forms. But anger, indifference, entitlement, or a refusal to forgive others are common ones. What stones in your life need to be rolled away? And if you have troubles rolling those stones away, reach out to me or someone else in this congregation. We are here to help each of us find new life. And sometimes, the first step is to roll a stone away. You are not alone. We are all in this together. Just reach out. What stones in your life need to be rolled away?

Today - 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.

As with the disciples, we are invited - not to go back to the "good old days", but rather to move forward to create "good new days". Easter is an invitation into our future.

What else would we expect new life look like? We are invited to continue the journey.

Lent is over, but our journey continues.

It's time to leave the tomb.

Amen.