

It Had Better Be True!
Mark 16:1-8
Easter Sunday – 3-31-24
Pastor Vern Christopherson

We live in a Friday kind of world. Radical terrorists attack a Moscow concert hall and upwards of 139 people get killed. A cargo ship in the Baltimore Harbor loses power, strikes a bridge support, and the Francis Scott Key Bridge collapses into the river, killing 6 construction workers. U.S. presidential candidates sling enough mud to make us want to turn off the TV and not vote for any of them – could I get an amen from the congregation? In a Friday kind of world, people do some terrible things. Terrorist strike, tragedy occurs, and candidates often act anything but presidential.

Considering the world we live in, which person sounds more like you – the one who comes to worship on Easter incredibly moved by the story and fully trusting in the resurrection to life...or the one who comes with a few questions, who occasionally wonders, “I don’t know; I just don’t know?” To be honest, I think there may be more people saying “I don’t know” than we realize. And sometimes those persons are you and me.

In a Friday kind of world, no one expects Easter. The women who get up early and go to the tomb are not expecting it. They grab a jar of spices and a handful of cemetery flowers. The Sabbath is over. They’re going to pay their last respects. As they walk along the path, they have one thing on their minds: Who’s going to roll away the stone for us—it’s heavy? The women are about to be surprised. They’re not expecting the stone to already be rolled back. They’re not expecting to meet up with an angel dressed in white. And they’re not expecting to be given a job to do: “Go,” says the angel, “tell the disciples and Peter that he’s going before you to Galilee.” Isn’t that just like Jesus - always one step ahead of his followers?

So, how does the trip to the cemetery turn out? Not so well. You heard what Mark described: The women flee from the tomb in fear and uncertainty, and promptly say nothing to anyone. Oh, that’s not good, not good at all! Mark ends his gospel, not with the greatest story ever told, but with one last, stunning collapse.

Why? Why would Mark end the story this way? I mean, you can’t exactly turn it into an Easter hymn. Perhaps Mark ends his story with fear and uncertainty

because it strikes a chord with us. Perhaps because, in a Friday kind of world, Easter is often the last thing on our minds.

A little context might be helpful. Mark is the first gospel. It was written some 40-50 years after the crucifixion of Jesus. What that tells us is that, regardless of how Mark ends his story, people in Mark's congregation already know how it turns out. The good guy wins in the end. Somehow, someone was brave enough to share it. Could Mark be trying to tell us that it often takes time to get beyond fear and uncertainty and to have someone actually believe it?

As I see it, there's a fine line between fear and hope, a fine line between "I don't know" and "I believe." Like the twelve disciples, the women flee in terror. In one sense, their world is the same as before – it's shrouded in darkness and disappointment. Yet, in another sense, their world is not the same. Whether they know it or not, the tomb is empty, and Jesus is out and on the loose. He's gone on ahead of them to Galilee, just as he told them.

Luther Seminary professor Gerhard Frost tells a story about a chance encounter with a long-time friend of his. Frost went to church on Easter Sunday. He sat down in his usual pew. To his surprise, he spotted a childhood friend and playmate just in front of him. He hadn't seen her in years. He smiled and waved. She waved back. It soon came time for sharing the peace. He eagerly touched her arm and said, "Christ is risen." She responded, "He is risen indeed!" Then she added in a whisper, "And it had better be true!" With tears in her eyes, she went on to explain that her husband had recently died. And it was all she could do to get out of bed that morning and come to church.

Reflecting on her words later, Frost recalled his own childhood memories of Easter, how he would bound down the stairs early in the morning, hoping to find a mound of delicious chocolate hidden away. It was a wonderful, carefree time. But, says Frost, with the passing of years, and the shadow of death looming over his own family circle, his view of Easter had changed. Now it was not so much a yearly springtime extravagance for wide-eyed children, but a daily, unrelenting necessity. Indeed, claims Frost, if hope is to flourish at all, it had better be true!

So, friends, is hope flourishing in the world in which you live? What are you experiencing these days – fear or hope? That might depend on the day or the week or the month, right? The women who follow Jesus, no less than the men, require redemption. Their eyes need to be opened, their ears unstopped, their

tongues loosened. There's a reason for them to be hopeful about the future, but it's not because any of them are heroes. It's because Jesus has gone on ahead, and the story is not yet finished.

Mark's gospel has given Jesus' followers every reason to believe that what Jesus promises will be fulfilled. During the crucifixion, his followers scattered, just as he told them. The cock crowed twice before Peter denied him three times, just as he told them. He died and was raised, just as he told them.

Now – says Mark – why not trust that the remainder of Jesus' promises will also come true? Why not trust that the gospel will be preached to all people? Why not believe that Jesus will be enthroned at God's right hand and will someday come on the clouds of heaven? In short, Mark urges, why not head off to Galilee? Isn't that just like Jesus, after all, to be one step ahead of us?

Ever since that first Easter, people have been vacillating between fear and hope. No one was expecting it. Not Mary Magdalene. Not Peter. Not the rest of the disciples. That's the thing about tombs. They're hard to explain, and even harder to accept. Sometimes we don't even know when we are in one ourselves, but we all seem to have them. We sense that the relationship is over. The money is gone. The time of happiness will never return. There's something buried deep inside, and we're convinced that it's as good as dead. It's enough to make a person wonder if Easter can ever be true.

In a Friday kind of world, Easter is often the last thing on our minds. But can you afford to live without an Easter faith? I don't think I can. For me, it is a daily, unrelenting necessity too. Jesus promises to listen when I get down on my knees and pray. It had better be true! He tells me I'm welcome at his table, even when I've messed up my life. It had better be true! He says, "I am the resurrection and the life," even as I stand at the graveside of someone I love. It had better be true!

No doubt, there's a fine line between fear and hope. We might think it depends on us and our attitude, but really it depends on God. And specifically, can God be trusted to finish what God has begun? Back in the second century, Saint Ignatius described Easter like this: "Jesus rose in the silence of God." I like that. It puts Easter squarely on God's shoulders. It's an event shrouded in mystery. It happened in the dark, in the quiet of a Sunday morning. No one expected help to come. And no one was there to witness it when it did. If it's

true, there's not much left to say. And if it's not true, there's not much left to say.

Back in 1985, a volcano erupted in Columbia, the Nevada del Ruiz. It happened with very little warning. Over 25,000 people in nearby villages were buried alive under molten lava. Most of them died instantly. But there was one man, Roberto Gonzalez, who was trapped inside his pickup truck. He was there in pitch-blackness for upwards of three days. He was panic-stricken. He screamed and hollered for help to come until he was hoarse, but no one could hear him. So he waited and prayed and hoped against hope.

In a turn of events that was nothing short of miraculous, rescue workers called for 24 hours of silence. No sirens, no radios, no cars – everyone was ordered to keep quiet and listen. A profound hush came over the land. Out of the silence, someone heard a faint cry. And it sounded like the cry of a man buried deep in the earth. Could it be? Was someone alive? Rescue workers frantically dug through the rubble. Shovel after shovel of the earth was ripped apart. Finally they found him. Roberto Gonzalez came forth from his tomb and saw the light of a new and glorious day.

Friends, that is something of the story of Easter. It's a reminder that there is no silence so profound that God cannot hear us. There is no grave so deep that God cannot find us. There is no tragedy so dark that the light of God cannot shine. We live in a Friday kind of world, it's true, but we follow an Easter kind of God – a God who can rip apart the earth and its darkness, and bring the Crucified One into the light of a new and glorious day.

Make no mistake about it, we are invited to follow this Easter God, not as a yearly springtime extravagance, but as a daily, unrelenting necessity. We say to this God: It had better be true! And God says to us as Easter: It is!

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed!