

March 31, 2024
The Resurrection of Our Lord, Easter Day
Year B
Mark 16:1-8
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

March Easter

On Monday of this Holy Week, I got a haircut. I've been going to the same people for my haircuts ever since I moved to Norwood, as have most of my family, so I know the folks there pretty well. They know that I'm a pastor and while I was getting my haircut, the person cutting it asked about this week, how busy it was going to be for me and if I was going to be hosting family for Easter dinner after church.

The answer to that is no, thank goodness. My sister and family are hosting at their house.

I then asked her what her plans for Easter were. Like I said, I know her pretty well, but I had forgotten that she is an Orthodox Christian, which she politely reminded me.

Usually, Orthodox Easter is just a week or so later than the Western church's Easter, but this year, our Easters are separated by three weeks. Her Easter isn't until April 21st.

When she told me that I exclaimed, "Oh, I'm so jealous!"

An April 21st Easter. Easter in real spring, when spring looks like spring. Easter when all of the flowers are blooming. Easter when there are leaves on the trees. Easter when the weather is warmer. Easter when the grass is green. Easter when new life is easy to spot, literally springing up from the earth around us.

I'm not a huge fan of March Easter.

Of course, Easter could have been earlier, it actually could have been last Sunday, so maybe I should consider us blessed that Easter is this week instead of last

week, but still, I just don't love March Easters. It feels rushed, spring definitely hasn't sprung, the world hasn't had a chance to catch up with the proclamation of new life. In years past, there's still been snow on the ground for March Easter.

Last night, when I was coming home from church after hanging up my alb and stole after the Easter Vigil at Grace Episcopal, I startled a bunny that had been hiding in the bushes against our house. "Well," I said, because I've reached the point in Holy Week, when I'm talking to wild animals in my backyard, "At least you're ready for Easter."

But, of course, you know, and I know, and you know that I know that Easter isn't a "spring holiday". That's not what we're celebrating today. All of the spring things that we associate with Easter aren't really about Easter at all.

But it does make it a little bit easier to proclaim new life, when we're seeing it all around us.

Speaking of easier, today's gospel reading is not what you'd call easy.

It starts off fine, the way we expect, with the women, Jesus' followers, making their way to his tomb in the early morning to anoint his body for burial, something that they hadn't been able to do when he was taken down from the cross late Friday afternoon, because it was too close to sundown, too close to the sabbath, when no work was allowed to be done. And our gospel reading continues the way that we'd expect too; the stone is rolled away, Jesus' body isn't there, an angel proclaims the message:

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. ⁷But 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. (Mark 16:6-7)

So far, all is as expected, the details differ a bit from gospel to gospel, but so far, Mark's gospel lines up with the rest of the gospel accounts of the resurrection. But then a strange thing happens. We hear how the women react to the news of the resurrection. And it is not what you'd expect.

In the gospel of Matthew, they respond with great joy.

In the gospel of Luke, they respond by telling the apostles about the resurrection.

In the gospel of John, Mary initially responds with sorrow, because she doesn't understand what was happening until Jesus called her name. But then she responds with boldness, announcing to the disciples, "I have seen the Lord!" (John 20:18)

But in Mark, we get a very different reaction. We don't get joy. We don't get bold messengers. Instead, the women hear the angel's news, that Jesus is not in the grave, that he has been raised, and they hear the angel tell them to go and tell Peter and the other disciples that the living Jesus will meet them in Galilee, and the women:

went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were terrified." (Mark 16:8)

Gotta love a March Easter. It's just not what you'd expect.

No one is completely sure why Mark's gospel ends the way that it does. Some scholars believe that the rest of Mark was lost, that the original copy of Mark was damaged somehow and the rest of the story that Mark wanted to tell has been lost to history.

But others believe that the gospel ends exactly where it's supposed to, with that cliffhanger ending.

People have, for centuries, been trying to fix the ending of the gospel of Mark. Trying to make it sound more “Easter-y”.

If you look at your Bibles when you get home, or even the Bibles in the pews in front of you, you will see that the gospel of Mark doesn't end with verse 8, there are 12 more verses in the gospel.

But if you look closely, you might also see that there is a mark or a note in your Bible, and that note will probably tell you that the oldest copies of the gospel of Mark end at verse 8 and that the following verses were added later.

In an effort to make the ending of gospel of Mark more “Easter-y” people have added, first one new ending, verses 9-11, that tell us that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene, who went and told the disciples about Jesus' resurrection, and they didn't believe her.

Then later someone added an even longer ending to Mark's gospel, verses 12-20, that tell us all kinds of things, that Jesus met two of his disciples on the road, who were not believed when they told the disciples about the resurrection, that Jesus scolded the disciples for not believing the news of his resurrection, that Jesus gave the disciples a commission to go and tell the whole creation the good news of resurrection and to baptize, and finally, that Jesus ascended into heaven.

According to the second added on bit, the gospel ends with these words.

And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it. (Mark 16:20)

Now that's the way to end a gospel. With believing disciples getting to work, blessed in their work by the resurrected presence of Jesus.

Unfortunately, that's not actually how Mark ends. And I'm inclined to believe that Mark's gospel actually ends with verse 8, exactly where it's supposed to, with terrified women running from the tomb and saying nothing to anyone.

I think that Mark's gospel ends there, as a challenge to the readers. As a challenge to us, as we celebrate a March Easter, when the world around us isn't announcing new life.

Because as we come to this Easter Sunday, this March Easter, it's not just nature that's not proclaiming life. The world around us, with wars in Ukraine, Sudan, Gaza, with terrorist attacks in Israel and Russia, and places we've never heard of, with people fleeing poverty, gangs, drugs, with nowhere to go, with our own personal tragedies and worries, the world around is proclaiming death, not life. And it is, indeed, terrifying.

And into that world of death, we are called to proclaim life. We are called to proclaim hope. We are called to proclaim joy. We are called to proclaim resurrection. We are called to tell the story of Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, to a world that might not believe it, to a culture that has largely rejected it. We are called to tell the story, even when we have trouble believing it ourselves. Talk about terrifying.

And Mark's gospel is asking us the question, what are we going to do? Are we going to run away from that message and mission, terrified, when we leave this place, when we put down our props, our alleluia signs, our joyful bells, our Easter songs, our flowers, our banners, and leave this safe space, this sanctuary, where we have let ourselves believe, where we have let ourselves rejoice? Are we going to stay silent when we have to go back out into a cold, rough-edged, angry, frightened, and grieving world? Or are we, strengthened by Jesus' presence, seen, spoken, sung, and received in Holy Communion, going to speak life into a world of death? Those are the questions that Mark's resurrection story is asking us.

Quite frankly, they're not easy questions to answer. But here's what gives me hope, on this March Easter Day.

It's that we are here, which means that somehow, those terrified women, who fled from the news of resurrection, who fled from the challenging of speaking life, somehow, someway, got past their fears, and told someone, who believed them, and that someone told someone else, who believed in the good news of life, who told someone else, and down through the centuries, we have received the message, that brought us here, out of a world of death, and suffering, to sing and celebrate life, and to bring hope to the world around us.

If they could do it, then maybe we can do, strengthened by Jesus's resurrected presence, empowered by the Holy Spirit, we can find the hope, the courage, the joy, to tell the world, that Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!