



easter  
practicing  
resurrection

MARCH 31  
9AM | 11AM

Sunday, March 31, 2024 | Easter Sunday  
“Practicing Resurrection”  
Mark 16:1-8 | Charlie Berthoud

Happy Easter! Did you know that there are some churches in our country that had Easter worship services yesterday, on Saturday? When I first heard that, I was surprised and thought to myself “that’s just wrong.”

Here at Covenant and in many other churches, we remembered the last supper on Maundy Thursday and the crucifixion of Jesus on Good Friday, and on Easter Sunday, today, we remember and celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. Holy Saturday, in between, being a time of vigil and prayer to remember Jesus in the tomb. Holy Saturday is not yet Easter.

But some large churches realized that people are busy and so they offer Easter celebrations on Saturday as well as Sunday.

While those of us who are liturgical purists might cringe, and those of us who don’t like change might cringe harder, after pondering this, I applaud these churches for thinking outside the box, and for recognizing an important theological point: We could celebrate Easter any day we want to celebrate it.

And we do. Every time we gather for worship in one way or another, we hear the Good News that Jesus conquered sin and death, that we are forgiven, that we are loved, that we have a second chance from God, that we have abundant and eternal life. We remind each other that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God brings new life to us and to the world.

The good news of Easter is true today and any day of the year.

So Happy Easter! Happy Easter next week! Happy Easter in the middle of August. Happy Easter any and every day!

The corresponding reality is that grief, sadness, isolation, and brokenness are not limited to Good Friday, the liturgical day when the church remembers the crucifixion of Jesus.

On Friday, we gathered for worship, and at the end of the service we wrote down our sins—individual and collective—and nailed them to the cross. Sins like selfishness, poverty, alcohol, racism, sloth, greed, and more.

However, our suffering and the world’s suffering don’t magically disappear between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

Just because today is Easter and we have beautiful flowers and great music and we say, “Christ is Risen, Happy Easter,” and we eat lots of yummy Easter candy, there are still people here and online and out in the world who are living in Good Friday reality—a world of pain and sadness and suffering and doubt and fear.

So, if you’re not feeling all the joy and love that we are “supposed” to feel today, that’s ok.

With the awareness of the reality of ongoing suffering and hardship in our world, our gospel reading today is really important. It comes from Mark chapter 16. I invite you to open your Bible to Mark 16, on page 55 of the New Testament in our pew Bibles.

Those of you online can get a Bible or open an online Bible.

Presbyterians take the Bible seriously, but not literally, so we do Bible studies. Today, we’re going to have a mini-Bible study.

Mark’s gospel ends with lots of uncertainty—uncertainty about what actually constitutes the text, and about the content itself.

Where does Mark end? We’re not sure.

As you can tell from the extensive footnotes with chapter 16, there is a shorter ending of Mark and there is a longer ending of Mark. Some Bibles have the longer and shorter endings in small print as footnotes.

In the world of biblical studies, there is uncertainty about which ending of Mark is

most reliable and authentic.

From what I can tell, a modest majority of scholars think that both the longer and shorter endings were added onto Mark, by editors who wanted a happy ending.

According to these scholars, the most reliable and authentic version ends with verse 8. Earlier in the service, you heard the first seven verses of Mark 16. In a minute, I'm going to read all eight, and as you'll hear, verse 8 is full of uncertainty and fear.

A few things to keep in mind before I read this:

- Jesus was dead. The women were going to anoint a body; there was no expectation of resurrection.
- The 12 male disciples are not involved; it's two women who go to the tomb. The women were the first Easter preachers. I saw a meme this week that said "In order to be biblically accurate, at the Easter sunrise service this year, only women are invited."
- Interestingly, the angel speaks of the disciples and Peter—as if Peter was no longer a disciple after denying Jesus three times.

And I want to share some other important notes about the gospel according to Mark as a whole.

The first sentence of the gospel says, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (Mark 1:1). It's actually not even a sentence, as there is no verb. But the choice of the word beginning brings us back to Genesis, the first book of the Bible, which opens with "In the beginning..." And by using the word beginning, there is a sense of an ongoing story. That's important. Stay tuned.

## Mark 1:14-18

Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news of God and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news....”

And Jesus said to [the fishers], “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed Jesus.

Later in chapter one, Jesus proclaims the good news of the kingdom of God, inviting people to turn around and follow him into new meaning and new purpose. His first words in the gospel are “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent and believe in the good news.” Then he calls two brothers to leave their nets behind and find new purpose in life with Jesus.

This passage is central to the gospel and central to our identity here at Covenant, where our calling is “Learning and Living God’s Love.” We are learning about this good news of the kingdom and we’re trying to live as new people because of it.

And before we read the conclusion of Mark, it’s important to remember that in the middle of the gospel, three times Jesus tells his disciples that he is going to die and to be raised up. But they don’t seem to understand.

Since you have your Bibles open: Remember that we are encouraging everyone at Covenant to read the book of Acts in April. It starts a little farther into the Bible (page 118 of the pew Bibles) and it tells the story of the early church. Tomorrow is April 1, you can read Acts 1.

Listen for God’s word from Mark 16:

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb.

They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “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.

But 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.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

What a strange ending! For an account that is supposed to be Good News, we don't expect it to end with fear and silence.

A more literal translation has the gospel ending this way:

“The women went out from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; they said nothing to anyone, they were afraid for....”

Some of you are probably upset at the sight of a sentence with a preposition, but more significant is the fact that this account of good news ends with fear and silence, and the fact that the story apparently is unfinished, incomplete, open-ended...

What this seems to be saying is that grief and sadness and fear and brokenness are real, but they are not the end of the story.

The abrupt ending of Mark's gospel is almost like one of those books where the reader gets to help write the next chapter.

Look at Peter. He denied Jesus three times and fled away. In our reading today the text mentions “the disciples and Peter” as if Peter was no longer a disciple. Yet, as you'll

see when you read Acts in April, Peter is forgiven, restored, and empowered to do great things with the second chance he got from God.

Peter got the message to not give into despair, to keep looking for new possibilities, to be open to hope.

Paul teaches that in Romans, telling us that neither death nor life nor anything else in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

In other words, no matter how bad things get, God's love is always with us, and we have reason to hope.

Author Frederick Buchner puts it well: The worst thing is never the last thing."

"The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best. It's the power from on high that comes down into the world, that wells up from the rock-bottom worst of the world like a hidden spring.

On this Easter Sunday, there are people dealing with "the worst" of things, stuck on Good Friday.

- Some of us are dealing with grief, missing our loved ones. There will be some empty chairs at Easter dinners.
- Some of us are dealing with relationship transitions or job transitions, with all sorts of emotional wounds and uncertainty.
- Some of us struggling with bad choices, poor habits, feeling like we're stuck.
- Some of us feel alone, like nobody understands us. Some of us are carrying burdens that no one else knows about.
- Whether we recognize it or not, all of us are dealing with racism and poverty and division and environmental destruction

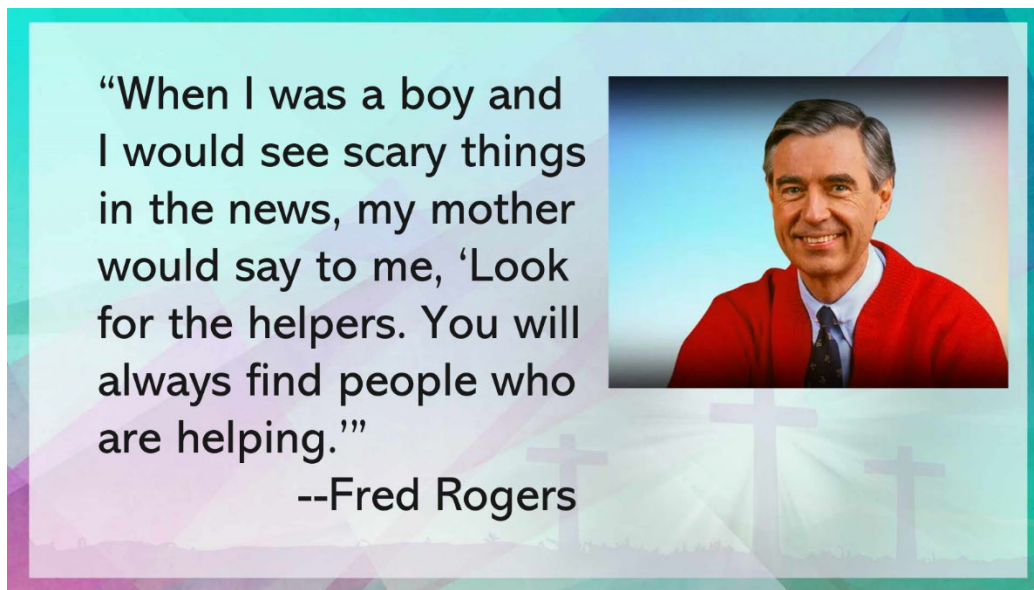
All of these situations are real, and some of them are really hard and last for a long time. But with caution of being over simplistic, the good news of Easter is that our hurt and pain and sadness and burdens are somehow, some way not the end of the story.

So how do we move the story forward?

Let's go back to the gospel. The angel tells the frightened women: Go to Galilee, there you will see the resurrected Jesus.

Their job on that first Easter was to open their eyes and look for Jesus, look for signs of new life, look for something hopeful, look for resurrection.

Remember how Mr. Rogers taught us all, when we're in scary situations, to look for the helpers?



The angel seems to be saying “When you’re in a Good Friday world, look for resurrection, look for Jesus, look for signs of new life and new hope.

This looking for Jesus and for signs of new life is what we could call practicing resurrection.

Over the season of Lent, we focused on five practices, or spiritual disciplines. Last week on Palm Sunday, I spoke about the practice of downward mobility, which could also be called humility. All of these are good practices which help us live the Christian life.



Today, I want to add one more practice—the practice of resurrection. Looking for new life in our hearts, our homes, and our world. Or you could say Learning and Living God’s Love.

To be good at anything we need practice, we need discipline.

Picking up a cello won’t make you Yo Yo Ma tomorrow. You need practice.

Picking up a basketball won’t make you Caitlin Clark tomorrow.

Going to an awesome worship service on Easter Sunday won’t make you a perfect Christian or take away all your problems tomorrow.

Together as a community, day by day, week by week, we practice resurrection together.

We can do this by looking for the goodness, the positivity, the hope all around.

We do this with our worship, our service, our fellowship. We do this by reading the book of Acts in April.

And we can practice resurrection by looking for smiles.





Medical professionals often ask patients how they feel, using a smiley face 10-point scale.

Zero is all smiles and no pain. Some of us are feeling that way right now. It’s the joy of Easter Sunday. Life is good and all is good.

Ten is a frown and tears and lots of pain—a Good Friday season of life—and some of us are there right now.

Most of us are in the middle somewhere.

My hope is that Easter Sunday helps us smile—with the inspiring music, the beautiful flowers, the jelly beans, the bad jokes in the sermon, the Good News of God’s steadfast love.

A simple smile reminds us that there is reason to hope. A simple smile encourages us to keep going. A simple smile might be just what someone around you needs.

On a table outside the sanctuary, you can pick up an orange smiley face sticker. I like the color orange because it seems joyful and happy.

Maybe you want to share a smile sticker with someone who might be having a rough time right now.



Or you can wear your smiley sticker as a reminder that the worst thing is never the last

thing, that nothing can separate us from God's love, and that we have reason to hope.

Happy Easter today. Happy Easter next week. Happy Easter every day! Christ is risen, leading us into new hope and new life.

Alleluia. Amen.