

“Rise up in Love”

My bet is that when we think of the story of the Resurrection most of us think of Mary Magdalene at the tomb early on the first day of the week. She sees the stone rolled away and without entering she runs to tell the disciples. Peter and another disciple hurry to the tomb to find it empty. They go home but Mary Magdalene returns and is tormented that Jesus' body has been stolen. As she exits the tomb she meets a gardener who turns out to be Jesus. He tells Mary to go tell the others, and she proclaims Jesus is raised from the dead. This is John's version of that first Easter morning. In many ways it is the least complex and least demanding of the four Resurrection narratives. Perhaps that is why we hear it most often on Easter.

But today, we heard what is most likely the oldest version of the Resurrection. It is also the most challenging of the Resurrection accounts. So much so that when you look in your Bible you will find two endings appended to this one. Those endings were written by later scribes seeking to fill out the narrative and make it easier on us. Nearly all scholars agree that the original Gospel of Mark ends at verse 16:8.

Cliffhanger endings are hard on us. We want to know what happens next. That is why so many TV dramas end the season with a cliffhanger. Most of us are old enough to remember the fuss over “who shot JR” on the show “Dallas.” That is just one example.

Despite the ambiguity, I think Mark's ending may just be the perfect conclusion for a number of reasons. One is that it is not neat and tidy. It draws us more deeply into the story. Jesus has told the disciples to meet him in Galilee. We wonder if they did. The ending also suggests that we go back to the opening of the Gospel. If we do, we notice afresh the first words, “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” This reminds us that what we are reading is only the beginning. Now that we are in the story we are called like the disciples to carry it on. There is not the sense as in other gospels that the work is over. The disciples have taken on their roles and all is well, but the disciples' role is ours. We are to carry the Good News of Jesus throughout the world. The Gospel is ongoing and we have a significant part to play.

It is also the perfect ending for our time. We are in the midst of so much uncertainty and upheaval. There is the Covid pandemic that has changed the way we live, and left so many dead in the US and around the world. There is the American epidemic of gun violence that continues to take tens of thousands of lives every year. There is the epidemic of racial injustice that has plagued the US for over 400 years. Just as we think we have made significant steps forward it rears its ugly head again as black, brown and Asian persons are targeted. Then there is the epidemic of conspiracy which is another cancerous ill fed by the dark web and other malevolent serpents. Their lies led people to storm our Capitol, and just two days ago led a man to kill Capitol police officer.

We are in the midst of many troubles that affect our lives deeply and keep us in a state of tension and stress. We are wondering what will happen next; just as the ending of Mark leaves us wondering. The difference is that we know how the Resurrection story turns out, mostly. We are not sure what the women did after fleeing the tomb, but we know that the story did not end there. We know because we are here. Jesus' ministry did not die on the cross with him that Good Friday. The disciples did meet up with Jesus after his Resurrection. It spurred them on to spread the Good News throughout the Middle East and beyond.

Indeed, how and where the disciples met the resurrected Jesus is unimportant. What is important is that they spread the Good News of Christ resurrected from the dead. That is what brings us here today, and brings billions of Christians to churches around the world. Those disciples and apostles such as Peter, Mary Magdalene, and Paul spread the Good News of God in Christ and people believed. They believed and shared despite the hardships it brought them. It would have been so much easier to just go along with the traditions in their culture. But there was something they believed and felt in their heart that made the Gospel too good not to share.

They believed and shared despite being ostracized by family and friends and despite torture and death. They believed and shared the Good News of a Messiah who preached love, forgiveness, caring, and kindness for all of God's children. Now it is in our hands to build up and share that Good News.

At the end of today's passage from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians he writes, "...so we proclaim and so you have come to believe." The more we proclaim the more we come to believe. Our proclamation allows the belief to take root in us. Our hearts which are often shaky are strengthened by our proclamation of God in Christ. If we just keep it to ourselves, it is like a love unspoken. Our beloved never knows our love if we do not say it and the love is unrequited. We must act on our love of God and our belief in the resurrected Lord whom we celebrate today.

The chorus of one of my favorite Easter hymns says it all. "Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim." Don't be shy about your love, shout it out. Lift up the cross of Jesus not in domination or antagonism, but in joy that Jesus' message and the message of the Resurrection is that God is love and love conquers all. It did that fateful weekend in Jerusalem and it continues to. Love conquers all our disappointments and woes. Have faith in it like those early disciples and proclaim the love of God in Christ to everyone. That is what is asked of this Easter and throughout our lives. Proclaim the promise of Easter in your best voice and from the bottom of your heart, just as we did at the beginning of today's service.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

[The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.]