

### “It all begins with Love”

It will not surprise you that I love Easter. Of course, as a Christian I love Easter because it is the day that our salvation is brought to fruition by the Resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. But I also love the pageantry of Easter. There really is nothing like it. The flowers. The fancy receptions with deviled eggs (the only devilish thing allowed on Easter), ham biscuits, fancy cakes and pies, chocolate bunnies, marshmallow Peeps, the panoramic Easter eggs with scenes inside that are too special to eat, jelly beans and so many more treats.

What is so very special is how people still dress up for Easter in church. The women and girls showing off pastel colored frocks, little boys with slicked down hair and clip on ties, men with in suits, and girls with white patent leather shoes and anklets, and women in their wonderful Easter hats. It is all so very wonderful to see that our casual society still knows how to dress up.

Our Easter is so different from that first Easter. The scene that is set in the Gospel of Mark is dark and there are no flowers, pastel colors, or festive meals. We say “Alleluia. Christ is risen.” But on that first Easter morning no one had any idea about resurrection. The women’s greatest concern was how would they get the stone rolled away from the entrance to the tomb. They might have wanted some men to help with that but the male disciples were all in hiding. This task was left up to the women. What no one knew was that during the darkness of the night something absolutely incredible had happened. God raised Jesus from death into new and eternal life. Not only was he resurrected but the tomb was opened and he was gone.

When the women approached the tomb they saw the stone rolled away. Fearing something awful they entered the tomb and saw that Jesus’ body was not there. The Gospel says that they were “alarmed.” I think “horrified” might be a better word. The first thought that ran through their minds must have been that someone had broken into the tomb and stolen his body. After all, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses had seen Joseph of Arimathea wrap Jesus’ body in a shroud and lay him in the tomb on Friday just two days before. What else could have happened. They were not thinking, “Oh well, I guess he is resurrected and we wasted money on these spices.” They would not think that because resurrection had never happened before. What were they to do? Who could they tell that Jesus’s body was stolen?

Then they noticed a man sitting on the right side of the tomb. He spoke to them as angels often do in the Bible and told them to not be alarmed. He went on saying, “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.” Undoubtedly they looked again in utter disbelief at the slab where they laid Jesus’ body. Then the angel gives the women instructions to tell Peter and the disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee.

In grief they had gone to the tomb to anoint the body of their dead friend and mentor Jesus of Nazareth. Two days of grieving had not resolved their grief, but they had a job to do. It was the custom of their people to anoint the dead with spices and oils. No one in their right mind would have anticipated what they had just discovered. As the Gospel reads, “terror and amazement had seized them.” After experience all of this, the women fled as any rational person would. I cannot imagine anyone responding differently.

Even more unsettling for us is what Mark writes next. “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The angel had just instructed them to tell Peter and the other disciples to meet Jesus in Galilee and now it appears the women have gone into hiding just as the men had.

Mark’s narrative is most likely the oldest version of the Resurrection. It is also the most challenging. So much so that when you look in your Bible you will find two endings appended to this one. These endings were written by later scribes seeking to fill out the narrative and make it easier on us. However, nearly all scholars agree that the original ending is at verse 16:8.

Despite what appears to be an abrupt and unfinished conclusion, I think Mark’s ending may just be the most perfect. First 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 and how the message got to them. 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. 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. The disciples’ role is our role, too. We are to carry the Good News of Jesus throughout the world. The Gospel is ongoing and we have a significant part to play.

What of that? Here we are in our Easter finery, surrounded by tulips, beautiful hangings, and ready to go to a festive reception, or sumptuous Easter meals with family and friends. Where does the discipleship come in? As always it comes in with those closest to us. We are to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to those with whom we celebrate today.

We can also share it with others we encounter. Perhaps we are running a little late for the meal and the car in front of us is going under the speed limit. Do we honk or pass or let our frustration fester or do we just smile accepting that one of God’s beloved is slowing us down and helping us to remember what day it is? Perhaps we need to pick up something at the grocery store for our feast and they have run out. No need to get ruffled for the feast will be wonderful no matter the one missing item. There are a hundred ways something can go wrong between here and the celebration. Remember that for those women everything seemed to be wrong, alarming, horrifying or just plain strange. So much so that they ran and told no one.

Despite that abrupt and troubling ending to Mark’s Gospel, we know that they did tell someone, because the news of the Resurrection has reached us

nearly two thousand years later. The fright those women had did not frustrate the Good News of Jesus. It might have delayed it for a little while. If they had permanently gone into hiding the Resurrection would be an event lost to history. No one would know.

We know and we celebrate and we have the gift of eternal life that is the best news we could share with anyone. Do not be alarmed for you do not have to go door to door or proselytize on street corners. Jesus' last commandment to his disciples, the one that gives Maundy Thursday its name is "Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."

That is the answer. Love one another. It is that simple. Love everyone as Jesus did, by seeing them, listening to them, and having compassion for them. Jesus knows it can be quite a challenge. He still loved his friends even when they abandoned him. He still loved his best friend after he denied him. He loved his followers when they ran away in fear as the women did. He even loved those who condemned and killed him. It is quite a challenge, but nothing worth living for is without its challenges.

We can start this day by loving those people who irk us or frustrate us in little ways. We find that with every act of love we are strengthened. When we struggle to love we ask for Jesus' help. He will help us as he helped his disciples. And when we fail, he will be there to urge us on. If a hodgepodge of fisherman, tax collectors, and itinerants can do it I think we can too. Just remember that it all begins with love.