

Good Morning,

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed. As pronounced in our ‘Service of Light,’ today we come before God empowered by the resurrection, unafraid and rejoicing! On Easter Sunday with fear and death defeated we open our arms wide awaiting, expecting, the glorious new creation as described in our Isaiah text this morning. We meet the new age ready to receive the promise of peace, joy, and life. We are ready to re-imagine how the truth of the resurrection and the empty tomb changes the world. Our gospel text nudges us to also re-imagine how the truth of the empty tomb changes our lives, how it changes us.

The Easter invitation is to see, to witness, and to keep going. Into the fullness of life and love. Our Isaiah text states that **God is actively creating this world as a joy and its people as a delight**. Easter is a triumph, not of the end accomplished but of life continued. It is a celebration over a world that is being renewed and an invitation to keep following in the footsteps of our Rabbi.

Mary Magdalene, Salome, and Mary are committed disciples of Jesus. Our day of celebration starts out by listening in on one of the most terrible mornings of these women’s lives. They don’t have a plan, everything they thought they new has been shattered. They don’t even know how they are going to roll away the stone. They come to the end of their time with their teacher, following him right to his tomb. and then they are invited even further in. They are told that this journey is going to keep going, they are commanded to proclaim the resurrection, placing them firmly on the continued path of discipleship. They are told to keep going. No wonder they hesitate in silence before taking up the task.

I am going to share with you a poem written by Judith Friesen Epp. It is a long verse poem that poignantly captures Mark’s Easter story.

Threatened by Resurrection

by Pastor Judith Friesen Epp

March 27, 2016 Home Street Mennonite Church

You would think,
wouldn't you,
that the three women
who found the stone rolled away,
who saw an empty tomb
who heard that Jesus had been raised,
You would think
that these three women
would have filled the stillness of that devastating dawn
with a raucous chorus of "Hallelujahs"
with gleeful shouts of elation
with a wild dance of ecstasy.
You would think,
Wouldn't you?

But upon hearing the news, the three women went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

And thus, the gospel writer Mark,
ends his resurrection story.
Terror, flight, silence.
No appearances of the risen Christ.
No great commission.
No ascension story.

***The women were terrified.
They fled.
They said nothing.***

So what of these three women?

In that early morning darkness they lay,
Waking with the deep shudder of remembering
Unable to hold back the onslaught of unbelievable ugliness
sliding out of their worst nightmares
and hardening, like concrete, into ghastly reality.
The arrest, the trials
The mocking, taunting,
the beating of Love and Life itself,
And everyone fled
Betraying, lying, denying
Deserting the one
they loved, followed, revered.

And only the women remained
to see the savage cruel crucifying
to hear his tortured dying cry
a living anguished echo in their ears.
to feel the stone slamming shut the tomb
shattering love
crushing hope
obliterating the way
of wholeness, healing, justice, peace.

And only three women arise,
creeping into the eerie, empty dawn
desperately clutching spices
in arms that cannot roll away the heavy stone
to hold the brutalized body
of a condemned rebel
whose three-day death stench
will not be dulled by their anointings.
Knowing not what else to do
they pour their grief into the horrors

across the centuries
 into relationships broken beyond repair
 addictions that bind lives
 illnesses that sap lifeblood
 fear and anxiety that paralyze
 poverty that imprisons possibility
 into our dying polluted earth

they pour their grief
 into the dead-endedness of the stories

only to find
 beyond human possibility
 beyond wildest imaginings
 the stone of impediment rolled away
 the tomb reopened
 and with it the story
 a way toward life in a place of death.

And a young man, clothed in a white robe, says to the women: 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. Go, tell his disciples and even Peter who denied him, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.

It is once more the call to follow
 to those who have deserted, lied, betrayed,
 abandoned the son of God himself,
 and even so the call of grace comes
 again and again
 Go!
 Circle back to Galilee
 whence the call to discipleship first came
 leave behind the boats once more
 untangle yourself from the nets.

But now
in the resurrection tomb,
the women suddenly know
both the dying and the living
the crucifying and the rising
the stunning splendour and the costly price
of discipleship.

They glimpse the resurrection that threatens soul and structure
spirit and system.

Afraid, in the same moment,
that this good news will change nothing
and that it will change everything.

Both amazed and terrified
they flee.

They say nothing.

There is only silence.

And we
you and I
are the only ones left
The disciples have deserted.

The women have fled.

Who will tell the “good news”?

The gospel writer Mark leaves us
you and me
at the empty tomb

the question hanging in the stillness.

“Who will tell the resurrection news?”

For now it is not only the three women who know.

You know.

And I know.

The story of discipleship will not go on without us.

How much do you, do I, want this resurrection?
 What are we willing to risk?
 What stones will we allow to be rolled away?
 Into what tombs of staleness, despair, resentment,
 anger, pain and death
 will we let the resurrection light shine?
 In what stenches of injustice and oppression, poverty and fear
 we will dare to live the crucifixion and the resurrection?
 To what will we die, in order to live?

Mark refuses to show us the risen Christ.

He will only say Go,

Leap

Risk the journey to Galilee
 to the wounds of the heart
 to the conflicts of community
 to the shadows of the street
 to the frailties of the world
 and there you will see him.

Jesus goes before us,
 and it is only in the following
 in the risk of going,
 in the giving of oneself to dying and living,
 that the stunning, dangerous beauty
 of the crucified risen Christ
 will be known.

Do you think
 that we
 who have found the stone rolled away,
 who have seen the empty tomb
 who have heard that Jesus has been raised,

Do you think
 that when we fill the stillness of this place
 with our chorus of “Hallelujahs”
 that we will know the daring glory of our song
 the dangerous beauty of our dance
 the blessed threat of resurrection?

Mark's gospel is my favourite account of the Easter Story. It is pointed and haunting and full of a hope that demands participation. It is easy to forget in the celebration of easter morning just how unsettling the resurrection really is. But the gospel of Mark - ever blunt and to the point - won't give us a tidy bow to close off the story. The very point of the gospel comes out in its painful ending. Ancient Literature was intended to do things, to make people act, or believe, or change their behaviour, it was never simply to entertain them. I feel the same way about theatre now, the best plays aren't there simply for entertainment. They should make you think and act and go home to your people and say 'you need to see this, this is important.'

The story of the resurrection is not a spectator sport. The empty tomb is a signpost pointing towards a new encounter with the risen Jesus. This is inspiring but not easy, the women are not being asked to step naively into a utopian world. The women know, really know the cost of transformation. And that morning they witness with reverence and awe the impact of divine action, of light overcoming darkness. It is a moment of inspiration and one requiring courage, of the women and of us. It would have been easier to stay small, play a more minor role and do some anointing. It would have been easier to be finished, to roll that stone right back over the opening of the tomb and have an ending to the story, something contained and unchanging.

Mark's original ending hangs like an unfinished sentence. Different things might come up for each of us in this space. The question that I hear lingering comes from Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables*. As we sit in the silence after vs. 8 I hear "**Are you afraid of the good that you can do?**" Can we be brave enough to keep following, going further in to the Easter story? What does it mean to allow our hearts to be cracked open like the tomb, and allow this resurrection to emerge, changing our lives and changing us.

The women are the last ones, everyone else has left, and at the end of this story they stand inadequate, and human and disciples still. The gospel of Mark is always showing us just how human Jesus' disciples are. We don't witness this resurrection and then immediately fly into the new creation of Isaiah where there is no weeping or fear or darkness. We are left with the women saying nothing. But before us we have the story, written down, passed on. So somebody said something. The resurrection happens in a moment and it happens over a lifetime. Because that's how transformation works. I take comfort in Elizabeth Schuessler Fiorenza's reminder that when reading this story we see that "**Jesus is going ahead - not going away.**" In vs. 7 we hear that Jesus has kept going, that he is still ahead of us, continuing to lead the way. **God is creating this world as a joy and its people a delight** and as disciples we are invited into the re-imagined world. To leap, to go, to follow.

To answer the command, the invitation of discipleship and pursue Jesus' ministry of emptying the tombs that trap and frighten us, that keeps us small and insignificant. We can cry out hallelujahs and bring light to places of shadow. We can know what it is to be flawed and scared and human. And to do good anyway. To accept grace always. And to follow in our Rabbi's footsteps forever.

Amen.