

April 4, 2021
Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“The Morning of Possibilities”

“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.”

My friend Dave was always a morning person. He never needed an alarm clock, and his parents never had to get him out of bed on a school day. He would be awake and dressed before anyone else arose, and when he got older, he would have the coffee made and the breakfast table set when his parents and younger brother woke up. When he entered his teenage years, Dave would continue to get up before sunrise when the rest of us would stay in bed well into late morning. On camping trips, Dave would annoy the rest of us when he tried to get others to join him for one of his early morning hikes, when everyone else wanted to see nothing more than the inside of their eyelids. When Dave was asked why he always got up so early – and really seemed to enjoy it – he answered without hesitation that *“mornings are great because they are filled with possibilities!”*

While I cannot say that I share in Dave’s enthusiasm about getting up early in the morning, my life circumstances find me arising far earlier than I ever thought would happen when I was younger; and I think I understand why he loved the morning. There is something wonderful about those hours when the sun is peeking up over the horizon and everything is fresh and quiet. The new day is just beginning; its history has not yet been written; it is a time that is indeed filled with possibilities that will be borne out as the day progresses. Mornings are a time in which the words of the psalmist come to mind: *“This is the day that the LORD has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”* (Psalm 118:24).

The morning when the women came to the tomb where Jesus had been buried on Good Friday may have been beautiful; Mark reports that *“very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb”* (16:2). But even if it was a dawn that was filled with promise, it is doubtful that the women saw any possibilities in this morning: *“Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him.”* (16:1). Although Jesus had been anointed with costly, pure myrrh prior to his death (*“... as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she*

broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head” – 14:3), Joseph of Arimathea did not anoint the body prior to its burial. The women return on the morning after the sabbath to complete the burial rituals of the Jewish people. For them, it was the final act of love and respect toward one who had brought such hope and possibilities, but now all those possibilities appear to have died when Jesus “*gave a loud cry and breathed his last*” (15:37).

As the women were approaching the tomb, they wondered “*who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?*” (16:3), a reminder that they had witnessed Joseph rolling it across the entrance (“*He then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb. Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus saw where the body was laid.*” (15:46-47). They are presumed to have witnessed the minimal burial preparations on Friday and know that Jesus’ body was not properly anointed. The size of the stone emphasizes the need for a helper if the women are to accomplish their task of anointing the body; but to their surprise, when they arrived at the tomb “*they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back*” (16:4). This surprising sight becomes even more unexpected “*as they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed.*” (16:5). While Mark does not identify him as such, the young man’s appearance and the women’s reaction is appropriate for an angelic appearance. Shining, white garments designate a heavenly being (“*... his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them*” – 9:3), and the reaction of fear is appropriate for an angelic appearance (“*Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*” – Luke 2:9). The angel anticipates their fear and knows what the women are seeking as he says 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.*” (16:6). Angelic appearances typically include reassurance, a statement about what the individual witnesses, and a command concerning what the person is to do in the future. The concrete identification of the person being sought, “*Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified,*” wards off the possible objection that the women had gone to the wrong tomb. His announcement that “*he has been raised*” reflects the early proclamation of the church (“*... that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures*” – 1 Corinthians 15:4) and is used to interpret the empty tomb, with the women encouraged to witness the empty tomb where they had witnessed the body of Jesus laid at this burial.

The women’s role as witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus is confirmed in the angel’s command that they “*go, tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to*

Galilee, just as he told you” (16:7). The angel’s phrase “*the disciples and Peter*” singles out Peter because he had boasted that he would die with Jesus even if all the rest fled (“*Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you*” – 14:31); instead, he denied even knowing Jesus (“*But he began to curse, and he swore an oath, ‘I do not know this man you are talking about.’*” – 14:71). When we last saw Peter, he was weeping as he recalled Jesus’ words that “*before the cock crows twice, you will deny me three times*” (14:72). This message contains a note of promise for the apostle: he will be reunited with Jesus; it will be a morning of new possibilities for the disciple who saw himself as a failure because he abandoned Jesus at his hour of need. Peter is also mentioned by Paul as the first disciple to see the risen Lord (“... *he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve*” – 1 Corinthians 15:5).

The women are told to remind the disciples of the promises that Jesus had made, both in his passion predictions and the promise that after the resurrection he would go ahead of them to Galilee:

- “Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.” – 8:31.
- “But after I am raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” – 14:28.

This promise recalls the earlier picture of Jesus “going before” his frightened disciples on the road up to Jerusalem (“*They were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them; they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid.*” – 10:32). The angel adds a clause to the earlier promise: “*there you will see him*”; this suggests a resurrection appearance in which the disciples are commissioned to finally undertake the mission for which Jesus has prepared them.

- “Now the disciples are to proclaim that the crucified Jesus of Nazareth is the beloved Son of God. By following Jesus back to Galilee, the disciples begin their mission where Jesus began his.” – PHEME PERKINS.

Mark’s narrative ends at tomb in Jerusalem; the Evangelist reports that 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 afraid*” (16:8). The “terror and amazement” that seize the women remind the reader that the women have just received a divine revelation (“*They did not know what to say, for they were terrified*” – 9:6). The fulfilled promise remains offstage; Mark’s Gospel includes no account

of an appearance of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ (the Scriptures include two alternate endings in which Christ appears to his disciples, but most scholars believe that these were later additions to the original Gospel). But even though we do not experience an appearance of the Risen Lord in this Gospel, we know that the women were faithful to the commission they received from the angel, for the word of Jesus' resurrection sounded forth from that time and place so that all people in all times and places might rejoice in the good news we proclaim on this day: that "*he has been raised; he is not here.*" The good news of Jesus' resurrection brings a dramatic reversal to the tragic narrative which seemed to end in the abandonment and death of the Son of God. The angel's command to "*go, tell his disciples and Peter*" is the promise of forgiveness and restitution for those who had abandoned and denied him, "*a renewed call and a fresh start for disciples chastened by failure and empowered by the resurrection*" (Lamar Williamson, Jr.). In Mark, things always occur "*as he told you*": the finding of the colt and the Upper Room, the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Peter, the flight of the disciples, and Jesus' suffering and death. Because the Word of God is always trustworthy and true, the women can believe that Jesus will meet his disciples and Peter in Galilee, because this is the word that has been told them by the one who has "*the word of eternal life*" (John 6:68).

- "Always he goes before us; always he beckons forward to a new appearance in the Galilee of the nations, in the Galilee of our daily lives. We never know where and when we shall see him; we only know we cannot escape him. 'He is going before you ... there you will see him.' This possibility and this promise make Mark the Gospel of expectations still unfulfilled and of a future beyond our control. It inspired in the women trembling, awe, and ecstatic dread. It still has the same impact on whoever has ears to hear." – Williamson.

The morning that seemed devoid of hope to the women who came to the tomb was transformed into the morning of possibilities by the Easter proclamation that "*he is not here; he has been raised.*" It is an invitation for us to look to the future through the message that is at the heart of our faith, that because Christ lives we shall live also, that death is not the final word for those who are in Christ Jesus, and that even the darkest night is followed by the promise of a new dawn, a morning of possibilities that come to us through the message that was proclaimed when the disciples met Jesus in Galilee, where the mission of the Church began to share this message of hope and possibility that are at the heart of the Gospel that we proclaim: "*Christ the Lord is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*"

- “But if the divine, life-giving power by which Jesus heals broken human and communities is the same divine, life-giving power that raises Jesus from the dead, then it would seem that the disciples, to the extent that they participate in Jesus’ healing mission, do in fact participate in a kind of resurrection ministry ... Christian discipleship is always Easter ministry.” – Ira Brent Driggers.

This Easter ministry that began when Jesus’ disciples were commissioned to proclaim the good news of Christ’s resurrection is a message that is needed in these times of continuing uncertainty and anxiety. As we prepared to celebrate our Lord’s Resurrection on Easter Sunday (an Easter that I was especially looking forward to after many years of being prevented from celebrating this most holy day of the year) the province announced that Ontario was once again entering a lockdown because of an alarming increase in COVID-19 infections. Even though many of us are observing all the appropriate guidelines and have received the first dose of the vaccine (which Susan and I received this past Wednesday), we know that we have no choice but to abide by this directive both in our personal lives and in the life of the church; but it is news that was very disappointing and discouraging. It may be hard to see any “light at the end of the tunnel,” any certainty about when life might return to some semblance of normality; but the Easter message promises us that because Christ is risen, we can look toward the future as a morning of new possibilities that are ours because in his death and resurrection Christ destroyed the powers of darkness, fear, and death that would keep us in darkness and despair. The good news of Easter is that the light of God’s love in Jesus Christ shines in the darkness, and no darkness – past, present, or future – can overcome it.

- “‘He is not here; he is risen as he said; he goes before you; spread the good news; do not be afraid. You have nothing to fear.’ That is the first, and that is the only message of Easter: Jesus Christ is risen from the dead and is not found where the dead are. He told us this, and it is so. He is out there ahead of us, and our job is to spread the good news that he lives; and, by the way, relax, stop worrying, stop thinking that it all depends on you. It has been accomplished. It has been done.” – Peter Gomes.

It still takes a loud alarm clock and several cups of strong coffee to wake me up in the morning; but I have learned to understand and appreciate what my friend Dave knew years ago: that mornings are the time of new beginnings and of fresh possibilities, the promise that the darkness has given way to the light, that the day has dawned as a time in which we can rejoice and be glad because every new day is a day in which all

things are new and all possibilities are before us because of what happened in the early hours of this day, when life began again because of the word the angel spoke to the women whose hope was born anew: *“he is not here, he has been raised.”* Let us rejoice and let us be glad; for *“had Christ, who once was slain, not burst his three-day prison, our faith had been in vain. But now has Christ arisen!”* (ELW Hymn 391). Every morning is a morning of possibilities, because on this Easter morning Christ the Lord is risen; and because he lives, and because he lives, we too shall live every day in the light of his love and live in the hope of new possibilities that belong to us because we belong to our Risen Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.