

Mark 16:1-8

You Will See Him

April 1, 2018-Easter

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\*Easter Sunday slide (with butterfly)

We spent the sermon time in Lent reading and thinking about the stories of the last days of Jesus' life, as written by the author of the Gospel of Mark. The question I posed to us at the beginning of the series was, "How did Jesus choose to spend his last days?", and based on that, "How might we choose to spend the time we have?"

Throughout the series, we saw Jesus in conflict with temple authorities, who collaborated with the Roman system of domination, legitimizing the oppression and exploitation of the Jewish people.

\*And on Friday, we came face to face with what happens to people who upset the status quo in a system of domination. Jesus was killed. The twelve disciples were no where in sight, only some of the women looked on from afar, horrified, while they watched Jesus breathe his last breath, and then while his body was placed in a tomb and sealed with a large stone. It was finished.

As I began to write this sermon, I honestly didn't want to review the happenings of Friday. I thought that talking about Friday would bring Friday's darkness into our Sunday and nobody comes to church on Easter to hear about Friday. Honestly, not many of us come to church on the Friday of Holy Week to hear about Friday. Friday is hard.

\*When we come to church on Easter, we come to hear that Friday's darkness has been overcome, and in its wake, there is nothing but sunshine, bunnies, and rainbows. But the truth is, without Friday, Sunday doesn't mean anything. It is hard to talk about and celebrate life when we haven't talked about and grieved death. So yes, Friday happened.

During worship on Friday night, we once again, read the story of Jesus' last moments with his disciples, his anguished prayers in the garden, his arrest, and his death.

\*At the end of the service, we extinguished all of the candles, except one, and used dried flowers to adorn a worn-looking cross, and we left in silence. Similarly, 2000 years ago, Mark's story tells us that Mary Magdalene and Mary, Jesus' mother, watched in silence as a stone was rolled in place at the tomb. There wasn't anything left to say. It was a horrible end to a messy, beautiful life.

This is Mark's story of the Resurrection of Jesus:

\*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.

As we read and interpret this and every part of the Bible, it is helpful to know what kind of literature we are reading. For example, when we read the Psalms, we should understand that we are reading poetry and lyrics to songs that were sung and prayed as part of worship. When we read Genesis, we should understand that we are reading a collection of stories that teach us something about how the Jewish people

understood their connection to God, the earth, their neighbors, and to one another. When we read Romans, we should know that it was a letter, written by Paul, to Christians in Rome. And when we read the Gospels, we are reading the stories of Jesus' life, ministry, and death, as told by people a full generation or more after his death, each told from the author's own perspective and experiences, written for specific audiences. Within the Gospels, there are parables, attributed to Jesus. These parables are stories Jesus used to make a point. They are not necessarily factual, they could be, but they don't have to be. While they don't always contain historic fact, they do contain truth.

Let's talk about that for a minute. Think about the most well-known parable---the Parable of the Good Samaritan. I have never heard anyone talk about whether or not this story really happened. The focus has never been about whether or not there was really a man left hurt by the side of the road, whether religious leaders really passed him by, and who that unnamed Samaritan was, if he was a real person at all. The focus of the story has always been on what the story meant, right? That is true of all of Jesus' parables. We don't care if the story of the Prodigal Son is factual. We care about the truth in the story. The truth is, God is like the father in the story, always loving and welcoming us back home.

The text I read this morning, Mark's story of Jesus' resurrection, is a parable. My saying that might make some of you uneasy, but please understand, calling a story a parable does not mean it can't be factual or true. There are Christians who believe the story is factual, that Jesus' body was literally brought back to life from death. And there are Christians who believe the story is not historic fact, but is a story told to teach us truth, something important about human beings and about God. A person can believe either of those things or something in between and still be a Christian. The important thing is, what does the story mean? Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan, in their book, *The Last*

*Week: What the Gospels Really Say About Jesus' Last Days in Jerusalem* write, "If you believe the tomb was empty, fine; now, what does this story mean? If you're unsure about that, or even if you are quite sure it didn't happen this way, fine; now, what do these stories mean?" The story means nothing until we assign meaning to it.

So, let's set aside whether or not the story of the empty tomb is factual and think about what the story is meant to teach us about God, ourselves, and the world in which we live. To begin, the story shows us that death cannot contain Jesus' message. In spite of the religious leaders' collaboration with Rome, in spite of the Romans' cruelty, in spite of the cross and the stone and the tomb, in spite of Friday, Jesus lives on. He lives on in each of us and in the way in which we choose to live out our lives. He lives on in our collective storytelling, in scripture, in our nativity scenes, our music, and our art. And he lives on in our faith traditions: communion, baptism, the Lord's Prayer. The story tells us, there is no tomb big enough or stone heavy enough to contain Jesus.

Jesus lives as God says, "yes," to Jesus and his ways, and "no," to the powers that killed him. This story is not about a life beyond this one or about every story ending with "happily ever after," for the ones who believe the right things, or even about sunshine, bunnies, and rainbows, it's so much better than that. The story of Easter is God's YES to justice, YES to non-violence, YES to compassion, YES to caring for each other and our neighbors, YES to peace, YES to love. It is a story that teaches us that the domination systems of this world, are not of God and they do not and will not have the final word.

The final word will not be with a criminal justice system that incarcerates 1 in 4 black men and 25% of the world's prison population. The final word will not be with the racism that continues to allow bad police to kill our black brothers. The final word will not be with crippling

wealth disparity and trickle-down economics that keeps the poor, poor. The final word will not be in a war zone, or with veterans who are homeless, and our children afraid to go to school. In the story of Jesus' resurrection, God has said no to all of this, and yes to the one who came to show us and teach us that these systems and ways will fall and there will be wholeness for all people and all of creation. And because of that, when life gets dark, when we feel desperate and afraid, this story is a source of hope and inspires us to continue to follow Jesus ways, even when it's hard. In the words of Rev. Dr. William Barber, "Jesus was crucified as a revolutionary because he cared for the poor and challenged the systems of evil and injustice, but on Sunday there was a resurrection. Today we need a resurrection of a moral movement because far too many are crucified by racism, poverty, ecological devastation, and militarism." The kin-dom of God is here and now, not in a distant far-away place, sometime in the future.

And this story makes a promise to Jesus' disciples and to all of us, "You will see him." We have to look to the other gospels for stories about how the twelve experienced Jesus post-resurrection, but Jesus will be "seen" or experienced after his death, not in the same ways as before, but he will stay with his followers forever, not just with his close friends for a little while, not just with early Christians, but with all followers of the ways of Jesus, in all times and all places. Borg and Crossan write, "The spirit, the presence, his followers knew in him before his death continues to be known. Jesus lives."

Mark's gospel is my favorite, followed closely by Luke's. But of all the gospel writers, I think Mark tells the Jesus story the best which is why the ending has been puzzling to me.

\*The story ends rather abruptly and, I have to say, is a little anticlimactic, "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. The End. Didn't the women know that when an angel says,

“Do not be alarmed...”, it’s always followed by good news? The women, who bravely watched as Jesus died and was placed in the tomb, were so terrified by the empty tomb and the possibility that Jesus really wasn’t dead, they ran away and never spoke of it again. What?

So maybe Mark just isn’t very good with endings. He has woven this wonderful story of Jesus’ life and ministry and then right here at the end, where we would expect the women, whom he has painted as faithful and courageous, to put on their hero capes and go and do exactly as the angel says, “...go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee.” But no. Mark leaves us saying, “What?”

There is a pattern in the Gospel of Mark. In a nutshell, the pattern is: All the people who should understand Jesus, don’t. All those who do, can’t be trusted. People who should know what’s going on, like the disciples, are clueless. The women were a bright spot...the woman who anointed Jesus, she was the first to believe what he said about his own death, the women who watched as he died on the cross and followed Joseph of Arimathea to the tomb and who showed up at the tomb on Sunday morning. But now, even the women fail, according to Mark’s ending.

On the flip side of the pattern, the ones who do realize what’s going on, who “get it” aren’t exactly trustworthy sources. For example, in Mark 5 there is the story of the demon that recognized Jesus, saying, “What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?” But a testimony by a demon isn’t something to write home about. And then there is the Roman centurion who says, at the cross, “Truly this man was God’s son.” But can you trust a *Roman commander* for a testimony? So, there we are. All the people who should “get it,” don’t. All those who do, are sketchy at best.

Except...except there are others who have seen and heard everything Jesus has said and done in the Gospel of Mark. They watched Jesus lift

up the vulnerable, give voice to the voiceless, angrily react to injustice in the temple, respond with compassion to the woman who touched the back of his cloak, pour out his heart to God in the garden. They saw the disciples scatter, felt the tension, fear, and disappointment as Jesus' life ended. They listened to the news of the empty tomb and heard the order to go and tell others. Do you know who these other people are? \*It's you...and it's me...it's all the readers of Mark's story.

This ending that Mark wrote, that threatens to end in failure, reminds us that **we** are called to share the good news of God's YES with the world. We are called to pick up where the women left off. And honestly, they left off seeming like they were more comfortable with death than they were with the possibility of life. The resurrection story inspires us to be different---to embrace hope and light and life, to tell the world the good news of God's YES. The story promises that when we can do that, we will see him. We will see him as we work for justice in our community and in the world. We will see him as we dream big for the future of this church, as we welcome the ones who have been excluded and marginalized, as we commit to expanding the table and doing new things. We will see him in the wisdom of our elders and the laughter of our children. We will see him in every stranger and in every one dear to us.

\*We will see him as we gather at the table and we will recognize him in each other, and our hearts will sing Alleluia, grateful for the gift of one another and the gift of a love that cannot be contained. Happy Easter...love wins. Amen.