

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021
Mark 16:1-8

Alleluia! Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen.

On this and every Easter Sunday, we celebrate the glorious resurrection of Jesus. We also rejoice that we, too, share in his resurrection and look forward to when death is forever defeated, God's kingdom fully reigns, and God is all in all. At that time, as Isaiah sings in his song of praise, the Lord "will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever." (Isaiah 25:7)

Our lesson this morning from Isaiah comes from a four-chapter section often referred to as the Apocalypse of Isaiah, because in it we hear common apocalyptic themes that history is quickly moving toward a final day of judgement when God will punish the wicked, redeem the righteous, and establish divine sovereignty over all creation.¹ The first chapter describes prophetic visions of judgement and worldwide destruction, resulting in chaos and cosmic upheavals, the tearing apart of nations, and the end of history. In the next chapter, from which we heard this morning, Isaiah makes it clear that judgment and destruction are never God's intended last words. From the silence and ruins that remain from the time of judgment, we now move to the joy of a lavish and abundant feast where the host is the Lord. This is a spectacular vision of a banquet on Mount Zion, to which all people will be invited and at which the yoke of death will be forever destroyed. Redemption and deliverance are not for Israel alone but for all peoples who turn to God in faith and humility. It is a time for rejoicing in the Lord, who saved the people and now reigns in glory on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem. God alone is king over all creation.

This hope and promise of God's reign coming fully to earth is at the very heart of Easter. Through the long journey in the desert of this Lenten year, we have prepared ourselves to receive God's redeeming grace and searched for those faint signs of God's in-breaking kingdom and new life being brought forth from our brokenness. We have sat in the emptiness and silence of Jesus' crucifixion and death, holding close the promise that God will raise him from the dead. This morning, we proclaim God's fulfillment of his promises and we rejoice, boldly proclaiming in the Psalmist's words: "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it."! (Psalm 118:23-24)

But just two days ago, we remembered the horrible details of Jesus' torture, crucifixion, and death. Since then, his body has lain in a freshly hewn tomb, secured by a large stone. Today, in the faint light of early morning, three devoted followers of Jesus, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome, sorrowfully go to the tomb to finish preparing his body for burial. These women had been with Jesus throughout his crucifixion and death. They knew where the tomb was for they had accompanied Jesus' body and watched as he was laid there. This morning they return, but instead of finding a dead body, they witness the impossible.

When they arrived at the tomb, they were surprised to find that the large stone was already moved away. With trepidation they entered the dark tomb and found Jesus' body to be gone. Instead, they encountered an angel who 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." (Mark 16:6) The angel then tells them to leave and tell the disciples to go to Galilee where they will see Jesus.

This is a story that we know so well. All during Holy Week – and I dare say all this past year – we have waited with bated breath finally to get to Easter Sunday when we might hear the great and joyous news we've been expecting: Jesus has been raised from the dead! After two thousand

¹ Balentine, Samuel E.; *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 2* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); 359

years of retelling, I think we've forgotten just how very, very strange and startling this story is! But the gospel lesson from Mark that we heard this morning reminds us just how shocking it was then.... and still should be today.

Mark is thought to be the earliest written of the Gospels, and his Easter account is steeped most deeply in the frightening newness of this awesome and incredible thing that God has done. In this account, Mary, Mary, and Salome are thunderstruck – terrified by what they have encountered. Upon hearing from the angel that Jesus has been raised and to go tell the others, Mark says they “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” (Mark 16:8) Their fear and speechlessness underscore for us how mighty and fearsome an act God has done.

This is an abrupt ending to this passage – one that makes most of us uncomfortable. This lesson seems almost to be more like an extension of Jesus' passion rather than a joyous proclamation of his resurrection. We want to fill the gap by reading further into the chapter and clinging to one of the two alternative “endings”, each thought to have been later additions to Mark's Gospel and which make a point to say that the women did in fact go and tell the others what they witnessed. No doubt these were written by those who were too uncomfortable with leaving the “good news” ending in this way.

The specific details of who did what and how the others found out may not be that important after all, for nothing this big remains quiet for long. While the evangelists may differ on the details of that morning, they all agree on one thing: that the tomb which had held Jesus' dead body is now empty. And it is this emptiness that we celebrate with our joyous shouts of Alleluia!

It has always been curious to me that the most relevant symbol of Easter is the empty tomb. Not eggs, spring flowers, or candy, but an empty tomb – something much more elusive and mysterious. It is hard to capture emptiness – it can't really be depicted and it certainly cannot be domesticated.² Emptiness is wild and uncontrollable – a vacuum is a powerful force, indeed. This is one of the reasons that the fierce landscapes of the desert are always so frightening. There is nowhere to hide and nothing to see and, yet, powerful and invisible forces are most certainly active.

Frederick Buechner writes about the challenge of the symbolism of the empty tomb. He says that “you can't make it into pageants and string it with lights. It doesn't move people to give presents to each other or sing of songs. It ebbs and flows all around us, the Eastertide. Even the great choruses of Handel's Messiah sound a little like a handful of crickets chirping under the moon.”³

This emptiness may, in fact, be the only way to truly capture the awesome transformative power of Easter. How else can we envision the divine depth and breadth of God's promised everlasting love for us? No “thing” can describe it in its fullness; no “thing” can contain it. This emptiness is beautiful, frightening, and glorious beyond measure. Encounter with the empty tomb will leave you forever changed – you are never the same person afterwards.

We should not, however, minimize how unsettling is this experience of transformation. Change is disruptive and we often resist it. Resurrection is not what we expect nor perhaps what we really want. We much prefer restoration or even improvement to wholesale renovation and transformation. Encounters with the empty tomb will change us in ways we cannot anticipate and may not prefer. Unlike resuscitated life, which is the restoration of the old, resurrected life is the transformation to something entirely new. We may not recognize the geography of this new life – or even ourselves within the landscape – and this can be disturbing. But God meets us in the emptiness of the tomb and invites us to come out and enter this new life.

The empty tomb shows, perhaps in the way only it can, the boundless love God has for his Son and for his beloved creation. In the grandest way, the empty tomb is a paradox wherein the

² Buechner, Frederick; *Whistling in the Dark* (HarperCollins, 1993); 46

³ Ibid.

symbol of the *fullness* of God's love is *emptiness*. It is within this divine emptiness of nothing that we may find everything for which our souls yearn. And it is from this encounter with emptiness, that we enter with both great joy and perhaps no small amount of trepidation our new life resurrected from death.

This morning, the empty tomb is the dramatic sign that the impossible has happened: Jesus has been risen and we also have risen with him. And our new home is found in the resurrection – in the surprising joy and fullness of the empty tomb. We are no longer adrift on the shifting sands of despair and death but, impossibly, our lives are now rooted in the glorious emptiness of God's love. It is there that we find our true identities as people of the Resurrection. And in the face of God's everlasting love and faithfulness, how can we do anything else but sing God's praises – rejoice and be glad in it?

Amen.