

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
Easter Sunday  
April 1, 2018

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. "Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

**An Unfolding Story**

You may have noticed this story of the first Easter morning doesn't have Jesus in it. Just a heavenly messenger, discarded grave cloths, and an empty tomb. Scholars say that Mark ended the story with an unfinished sentence: The women told no one, for... dot dot dot and that someone, later, finished the sentence, gave us a reason: *for they were afraid*. It is an odd way to end the story, but there you go.

Unfinished things...now I know something about that! Once, when I was just dating my husband, I decided to knit him a sweater, a deep teal green it was. Using circular needles I got about half way up a belly, and stopped. So it wasn't going to be the birthday present I intended. We got married (it wasn't a wedding present either). We moved, and the unfinished project got stuck in a closet. I may have added a few rows, but life was busy with a new child in the family, between the two of us four other children to keep track of, two pastors and two churches to serve, and truth be told, I wasn't really all that ardent a knitter.

When it came time to move from that house to another, my husband, cleaning out the closet, held the one quarter done sweater, or should I say belly tube out in front of him and said, "We aren't moving this with us are we?" looking at it with great disdain. When I said "Sure, I might just finish it one of these days" He said "Okay, I'm gonna tell you: I never liked the color all that much!" and that was that - I passed partially knitted sweater and remaining yarn on to a friend who may or may not have finished it for someone else.

Along my unfinished list of shame there is also my kids scrapbooks. Years ago I bought all this cute scrapbooking stuff, special scissors, stickers, even sort of organized some of the photos. Then the switch to digital pictures, our family moved

(again) there was another church to serve, and weekly sermons to write and dogs to walk, and kids to raise, aging parents to tend to... I am now thinking a finished scrapbook may be a retirement project for goodness sakes!

But what to make of an unfinished *gospel*? Was Mark too busy finding out what it meant that the tomb was empty, too busy experiencing the hope and joy of the resurrection to really sit down and write more about it? Was it really just his agenda to bring you the life and death of Jesus and to leave other chapters in other hands? Oh, you can get your Bibles out and check out Mark's ending. After tacking on the "they were afraid" piece there is then, a shorter two sentence ending and then, a longer, several paragraph ending -- both sort of stuck in there.

But no one believes those are original -- the writing sounds nothing like the sixteen chapters that came before. But the fact that those "fake endings" -- let's call them that -- are even there tells you something about human nature: We don't like things that leave us hanging. We like things with closure, things that are neatly wrapped up.

This morning, right before this service, we had an Easter Pageant. Many churches have Christmas pageants, but Easter pageants are a little more unusual. The Easter pageant is what we might call a conflation -- bringing together many stories of Jesus resurrection appearances from all four gospels and weaving them together into one. So, you have Jesus appearing to the disciples gathering in the upper room (that's John) You have him showing up by the lakeshore, helping the fishermen disciples take in an enormous haul of fish (also John) In some pageants Jesus will appear to saddened disciples walking the Emmaus road, that's Luke, but this year we omitted that.

Our pageant this year also left out the story about Peter, the one dramatized in sculpture on the cover of our bulletin today. It's yet another resurrection story -- Jesus appears to Peter asking him three times "Do you love me?" It pains Peter, because he remembers how he denied Jesus, how the cock crowed three times. He falls to his knees, saying "Lord, you know I love you." And Jesus says "Feed my sheep" which is to say if you love me, you'll know I still have work for you to do, and you'll pay attention to other people. People I care about. The story is ongoing. The story continues to unfold. And failure in the past doesn't disqualify any of us for usefulness in the future.

This week, curious about the "March for our Lives" rally that happened in our nation's capital, I watched a You Tube video of Emma Gonzalez speaking, a week ago Saturday. You would recognize her picture, the pretty young high school senior with her hair cut very short—she's been called names because of that very short haircut, but she keeps speaking.

She spoke of the students cut down, noting how now they would never eat together in the cafeteria, cut up in the halls, play basketball, hang out with their girlfriend...all

the things for which each was known. She got through all the names...and then she stopped.

She simply stopped speaking. And stared straight ahead, out at the crowd. People bowed their heads, remembering, And the silence went on. A few people called out a few things "Never again!" or "We love you Emma!" A tear was coming down her face but there she stood. Not saying *anything*.

And just as you began to wonder, would she ever speak again the timer on her cell phone went off. It had been six minutes and twenty seconds since she'd taken the podium--the amount of time the killer had been in the building, the amount of time it took to take those seventeen lives, the amount of time students had to spend huddled and hiding in their classrooms. Which is basically what Emma Gonzalez said, and then she sat down, her speech over.

Those were long minutes -- deep remembrance for lives lost. But it was also a time, a long enough time to think and wonder: How is this story going to end? How is this tragedy, and so many before it, going to shape what happens next? How is this ongoing story of American life going to unfold, and will our words, our actions, our *caring enough* turn this all around, and soon?

One of the things I like the most about our denomination, the United Church of Christ, is our reliance on Gracie Allen, comedian George Burn's wife, for our theology. As she was dying, she, the love of his life said to her husband "Never put a period where God has placed a comma". And we've picked up on that – on websites and liturgical stoles. In fact, some of us wear these little comma pins to celebrate that wisdom, Gracie's fine counsel. It reminds us that our lives are indeed an ongoing story and that often the way we see things is incomplete -- and that God can bring forth different possibilities, different endings than what we expected.

The women in Mark's gospel saw a stone rolled away, an empty grave, grave cloths. They heard the announcement "he is not here. He is risen as he said." It wasn't yet enough for them. And their fear may have even been precisely this: that the story *wasn't* over, but *they didn't know what that possibly meant* for them or for the other disciples. So, in their bewilderment, their uncertainty, they were silent "they told no one".

The women's silence was not a period, though it could have seemed like one. It was only a comma. For despite their silence, the resurrection continued to unfold, in the disciples lives, in the early church's life. It unfolds in our lives today.

In this season of Lent I've been reading a great book *The Book of Joy: Lasting Happiness in a Changing World* which basically describes an encounter, an extended conversation between the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Each spoke of the hard times in their lives – Archbishop Desmond Tutu, prominent leader in the crusade for justice in South Africa, nearly died of various diseases as a child and as a

young man -- three times he nearly died. And the Dalai Lama, the great religious leader from Tibet, he was only twenty-four when he and his people were expelled from Tibet and had to seek refuge in India because during the cultural revolution, the Chinese government did nearly everything in their power to destroy Tibetan culture and religion. And yet these two know great joy. Perhaps, they mused, their capacity for knowing deep joy is heightened *precisely because they had those difficult experiences, those experiences where it seemed like everything was ending.*

Throughout the book, between chapters, there are great photos of these two laughing together, enjoying each other's company and each other's story. They love to playfully banter with each other -- a great sign, I think, of spiritual maturity -- not taking ourselves too seriously.

What I am learning in reading this book about these two great men is that faith held properly will hold great respect for the other -- and great respect for mystery. It does not have to have everything nailed down. There is space for the unfolding story, and for new lessons, new teachings.

Many people, looking at the church from the outside think it is a place for certainties. We are certain about our doctrine. What we believe. What God is doing. Well, maybe that is going a bit too far. Maybe what we are in the church is people who *wonder*. What is God revealing to us about how to live well in these days? What are the things we should most care about? How can we put our energy toward greater kinship with all people, towards healing and hope here in our community and in the world? When the first believers shared that exchange Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! They were saying to one another be expectant. New life is possible. Their risen Lord had convinced them, you see, that God was still at work.

Our faith is as simple as this: the story of God is not yet finished. It will continue to unfold. In my life it is still unfolding. In this church it is still unfolding. And in our world it is still unfolding. And when I'm gone, when my earthly time is over even when this church as we've presently known it is gone, even when our beloved nation, our country as we know it now ceases to exist, the story of God will continue to unfold.

This life, it is all passing. But by God's power, thanks be to God, resurrection continues.

Amen.