

Do not Downsize Easter because...

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

31 March 2024

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Text: Mark 16:1-8

“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.”

~ Mark 16:8

Prayer

God of mystery,

We gather this morning fully aware

That the Good News of Easter is bigger than human words.

Like the women who went to the tomb early in the morning,

We live in a world of crucifixion, violence, genocide, war, and death,

Where, too often, it feels as if the brutal and evil powers

Among us were winning.

So, draw us into the resurrection story once again.

Startle us with your life-giving power.

Remind us, once again, that in Christ,

There is no end that cannot become a new beginning.

In the name of our Risen Lord, your Son Jesus Christ,

We make this prayer. Amen.

A couple of weeks ago, I told one of my clergy colleagues that as someone who grew up in the Southern Hemisphere where Easter is celebrated at just around the time when the sunny days and vivid colors of summer are slowly transitioning into the more muted tones and cooler temperatures of autumn, I do not connect Easter with the signs of new life that come with springtime as some people, on this side of the equator, do. Right away, my friend quipped, ***“Well, this year you should feel right at home! It’s been pretty chilly, wet and gray and there is no sign that spring is coming ever!”*** I fired right back and said... jokingly, ***“Pull yourself together, man! Spring is already here... it’s just hard to see, feel or believe it!”***

You may not have realized it, but you are among the luckiest people on earth. Climatologists say that this is the earliest astronomical spring anyone alive today has ever experienced. The last time the vernal equinox occurred this early was in 1896. Looking on the bright side, the good news is that you and I are able to say that we are living through the earliest spring in 124 years. And, of course, this also means that we have to put up with this unsettled and unsettling spring weather and be grateful that, every now and again, we do get a day as beautiful as we did yesterday. And, while the cold, soggy, cloudy and bleak start of spring may have been frustrating and even

depressing at times, this un-spring-like-weather does heighten our yearning and readiness for the sunnier and warmer days to come.

Theologically speaking, this early spring weather lends itself as a much better metaphor for Easter than potted white lilies, butterflies emerging from their cocoons, spring chicks, or Easter bunnies carrying baskets full of chocolate eggs.

In all four Gospels, Easter happens somewhere between the heartbreaking emptiness of Holy Saturday and the heart-repairing mystery of the empty tomb, very early in the morning, at dawn, when the night is chased away by daylight, in that liminal space between darkness and new light where you have to squint your eyes to see in the shadows the new thing that is beginning to be revealed by the increasing brightness of a new day. And, at least, according to Mark, the earliest of the Gospels and the first evangelist to put the resurrection story into writing, the first Easter Sunday also ends awkwardly in a place between terror and amazement, trauma and ecstasy, trembling and astonishment, fear and joy, faith and doubt, silence and hope.

The Early Church was so disturbed by Mark's brief account of the resurrection, especially with its very abrupt and unsatisfying ending, that some faithful Christian copyists and editors kept tinkering with the original story, adding to it, making it a little longer, a bit tidier and more acceptable. If you look up the Easter story in the 16th chapter of Mark's Gospel, you will find in brackets what are known as "*the shorter ending*" and "*the longer ending*" of Mark, but there is virtually unanimous agreement among New Testament scholars that Mark ended his Gospel with the unsettling lines of verse 8: "**So they [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.**" We celebrate Easter with the sound of trumpets, shouts of alleluia, beautiful flowers and uplifting hymns, but the trinity of women who were the first eyewitnesses and "*earwitnesses*" to the resurrection were overpowered by shock and bewilderment and stunned into speechlessness.

In Mark's Easter story, the women never see the Risen Christ. They do not hear the Risen Christ call their names in the cemetery to offer them solace. They do not have the opportunity to touch the wounds of the crucifixion in his resurrected body. The words of the young man clad in white in the empty tomb, "**Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here**" rather than praise and excitement caused the women to make a quick exit and run away from the angelic presence and the tomb. The response to the first Easter sermon in Mark was distress, surprise, fear and silence.

Speaking about this unsettled and unsettling ending to the news of the resurrection, one of the greatest American preachers, the late Rev. Fred Craddock, once asked, "**Is this any way to run a resurrection? Is this enough to persuade, to stir new life in the followers of Jesus?**"ⁱⁱ

The writer of Mark's Gospel obviously knew the whole story of the resurrection. He wrote his Gospel at least 35 years after the women stumbled on the empty tomb. Still, this evangelist understood that he was writing to followers of Christ who would gather to worship on Easter Sunday unsure if they could feel, believe and see themselves in the story about the resurrection. Mark's unfinished and unsatisfying ending puts the women in the same place we find ourselves today, right now. We have not seen the Risen Christ. We have not heard his voice out loud, calling our names. And we have not touched his pierced side or wounded hands either. We inhabit the same space the women did day in and day out, somewhere between hope and despair, strength and weakness, love and hate, contentment and disappointment, courage and fear, amazement and trauma, faith and disbelief. The emotions and feelings that we experience on a daily basis are much similar to those shared by the women who went to the tomb on Easter Day. They were hopeless, torn apart by doubt, uncertain of their future, fully aware of how powerless they were before the powers of this world. We also know a lot about fear, uncertainty, violence, heartbreak and hopelessness.

Last week, I finally mustered up emotional strength to read about Aaron Bushnell, the 25-year-old senior airman from Whitman here in Mass., who immolated himself in front of the Israeli Embassy in D.C. to protest the massacre in Gaza. He posted a final message on his Facebook page that said: "***Many of us like to ask ourselves, 'What would I do if I was alive during slavery? Or the Jim Crow South? Or apartheid? What would I do if my country was committing genocide?' The answer is, you're doing it. Right now.***"ⁱⁱⁱ It is absolutely heartbreaking to think that anyone, especially a young person, would even consider self-immolation as a form of protest – every human life is precious – but Bushnell's haunting questions do speak about the space we occupy in the world. Like the women in the Easter story, we are caught between the reality of the ongoing war in Ukraine, the genocide in Gaza, which is a type of crucifixion, and our hope for peace, our longing for justice, our desire to see the hostages released and the yearning for the Easter message to empower us to love life, save lives, and protect life on our planet. And the question is: what are we going to do as Easter people? Like the women who fled from the tomb, we struggle with the choices we will have to make in a consequential presidential election where 1 in 4 Americans are dissatisfied with both candidates^{iv} and our longing for a peaceful and more graceful future where we all can live and thrive without hyper-partisanship and polarization. And the question is: what are we going to do as Easter people? Like the women we too suffer when death comes to someone we love. Like the women in the Gospel, we feel impotent when we face the pain of loss, when life breaks our hearts, and our most cherished dreams fall apart. And the question still is: how are we going to live through all this unsettled and unsettling time in the world and in our lives as Easter people?

We all live in that same in-between space of the first Easter morning, a place of endings and new beginnings, darkness and light, where we often ask ourselves whether we can believe in the resurrection or whether we are fools to even imagine that the

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

Easter faith can make any difference in our lives or in the world with all its complexities. The message at the heart of Easter is not that God was just doing something through Christ to make the world nicer; the resurrection is an invitation and a challenge to those of us who gather here today to live by different values, by the values of God's Kingdom, by the faith that tells us there is a new way of being human, a new way of living, laughing, loving and facing this beautiful and terrifying world that is radically different from anything we have ever experienced in our lives.

It is interesting to think that the Gospel of Mark does not have a satisfactory ending, but it has a very powerful beginning. Mark begins with Jesus going to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "***The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news.***"^v And the Easter message tells us that the Risen Christ wants us to go back to that place where the good news first became real in our lives. "[Go], ***tell his disciples and Peter,***" the young man told the women, "***that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.***"

The Gospel asks us not to downsize the mystery of the resurrection to make Easter more palatable, instead Mark tells to go back to the beginning where everything started so we may encounter the Living Christ not in our vague religiosity or traditional worship, but in those spaces between darkness and light, Good Friday and Easter morning, the crucifixion and the empty tomb, death and life where we have to decide how we are going to show ourselves and the world that resurrection is also happening in us. Mark says that Easter takes on human flesh back in Galilee where the disciples now will have to decide whether they will act out the resurrection by sharing the teachings of Jesus, following in his footsteps, feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, challenging wrongdoing, speaking out against oppression, seeking out the lonely and the excluded, loving God and the neighbor and living as Easter people.

This may be the reason the women vacillated between terror and amazement when they heard the message the young man announced in the tomb, "***He is not here.***" If Jesus was not there, then they could not mourn and go back to business as usual. They would not be able to take refuge in hopelessness and inaction or cynicism. If Jesus was risen, the women would not be able to ever see the world in the same light again. Resurrection changed everything! Never again they would be able to avoid asking the question about how to live as faithful Easter people.

In his clumsy original Greek, the evangelist ends the last verse with a conjunction hanging at the very end of the sentence. A literal translation of Mark's closing words would sound like this: "*and to none nothing they spoke; they were afraid for*" or "*they were afraid because.*"^{vi}

I think the women were trembling, astonished and silent as they ran away from the tomb for the same reasons we hardly talk about resurrection or Easter outside the

walls of this sanctuary on Easter Sunday. They were terrified and ecstatic at the same time **because** they knew as we know that the Easter proclamation, as extraordinary and hard to believe as it may sound and be, does not end with this service or with this sermon or with the Hallelujah Chorus and it cannot remain within these walls. As hard as it may be to believe in goodness, in peace, in love, in hope, in forgiveness, in justice, in Easter when so much around us testifies to the brutal power of injustice, greed, violence, destruction, war and death, the resurrection affirms that through Christ, God turned the story of the crucifixion into a story of hope and new life. As Presbyterian minister Rebecca Gurney put it, ***“The empty tomb is like a black hole in the middle of history, slowly pulling all of creation into its center; only for everything to emerge again on the other side – not just washed, not just a little nicer, but entirely, beautifully, inexplicably made new.”***^{vii}

Friends, thank you for coming today. Thank you for gathering on this holy day to remember why the Church keeps the rumor of the resurrection alive and refuses to downsize the power of God who makes Easter happen among us. It is always delightful to see the pews full and catch up with some of you whom I have not seen since Christmas Eve. You know I had to make this joke!

I hope you will stay for our Easter brunch in Hartman Hall and the Easter Egg Hunt. And when you return to your homes, remember that the story of Easter will go on tomorrow because there will be no satisfying ending to this story until the whole world is transformed by God’s life-giving power. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is just the beginning of the transformation of the whole world. The transformation begins here today with you and me and goes on every day as we ask ourselves and each other how we are going to live as Easter people, not just on Easter Sunday, but each unsettled and unsettling new day.

Christ is risen and the story of God’s saving love and grace in the world continues. This is what Easter is all about. Alleluia! Christ is risen.

Feliz Páscoa! Happy Easter!

ⁱ I am indebted to Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm for this language of “earwitnesses”. See [Preaching The Gospel of Mark](#), p. 261.

ⁱⁱ Fred Craddock in [He is not here](#), Christian Century, p. 21, 03 April 2003.

ⁱⁱⁱ By Khaleda Rahman in [Aaron Bushnell's Facebook Reveals Final Message Before Self-Immolation](#), Newsweek, News, published 26 February 2024 [<https://www.newsweek.com/aaron-bushnell-final-message-fire-israeli-embassy-washington-dc-1873242>].

^{iv} By Shanay Gracia and Hannah Harting in [About 1 in 4 Americans have unfavorable views of both Biden and Trump](#), Pew Research Center, 19 March 2024 [<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/19/about-1-in-4-americans-have-unfavorable-views-of-both-biden-and-trump/>].

^v Mark 1:14-15.

^{vi} My own translation.

^{vii} By Rebecca Murphy in [Journal for Preachers](#), “Somehow,” p. 30, vol. XLVII, Number 3, Easter, 2024.