

Fleeing the Tomb

A Message for Sunday Morning Worship with Communion
April 4, 2021 – Easter Sunday
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT
Text: Mark 16:1-8

Christ Is Risen! Christ Is Risen Indeed! Such is the ancient greeting Christians have exchanged on this day for almost two millennia. The celebration of the Empty Tomb and the corresponding Resurrection of Jesus are the foundational elements of the Christian faith. It is no exaggeration to say that the Resurrection is the reason we are here today. It is what undergirds all those colored Easter eggs and chocolate bunnies. It's why we dye Easter eggs, reminding ourselves of the new life always emerging from unexpected places. The Empty Tomb in a long ago garden is why flowers are so much a part of Easter celebrations. The bulbs of lilies and tulips and daffodils are yet another symbol of beautiful, spectacular life bursting forth from something that looks dead. Something that looks like it should be buried. The bulb is buried in the earth and then what happens? New life bursts forth. It is no accident that for us in the Northern Hemisphere at least, Easter happens as spring returns, the dead and lifeless trees and shrubs suddenly alive with the promise of new life. And that, dear ones, is what Easter is all about – new life from unexpected places, like a cold, dark tomb.

We already know the story of the Resurrection of Jesus on Easter morning. Or, we think we do. We tend to think about it in its most elemental form, as repeated in the ancient Nicene Creed, for example. “For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures...” Holy Week focuses on the first sentence, the one about crucifixion, death and burial. Easter is all about that second sentence, that he rose again on the third day. This is the central doctrine of faith on which all of Christianity is built. Jesus was dead and then he was alive again. Fully alive. Not a ghost or an evil spirit or even a zombie. Jesus was alive, the marks of the crucifixion and torture still visible on his body. We as Christians in the congregational tradition consider ourselves to be the Easter people, the people of the empty cross and the empty tomb. We are

the people brought to new life through this saving act of Jesus, this supreme example of God's abiding love and unfailing and unmerited grace for us, flawed and fragile human beings that we are. Biblical scholar William Barclay explains that we are who we are as Christians because of what the Resurrection reveals to us. It reveals that Jesus was not a character in a story or the mere memory of a few close friends but a living presence still actively involved in our lives this day. It reveals that living as a follower of Jesus means *knowing* Jesus in your heart and soul, not just knowing *about* Jesus in your head. We are assured that our faith is a living and evolving part of who we are, changing and growing as we do. Finally, we learn from the Gospel accounts of the Resurrection that the two most important words in the story are "go, tell." (William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark*, 1976, The Westminster Press, p. 368-9)

These are the exact words spoken by the "young man dressed in white" who greeted the women as they came to the tomb early on the morning following the Sabbath. Since Jesus had to be buried quickly as the Sabbath was soon to start, the women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, according to Mark – brought spices and unguents to finish preparing his body for burial. As they walked along, they worried about how they would be able to move the massive stone which had been rolled in place to close the tomb. But, when they arrived and it was already moved away and the tomb was open. They entered the tomb expecting to find the cold, dead body of the crucified Jesus but found instead the young man dressed in white. No mention in Mark of the grave clothes. No description of the young man as an angel. He was just there, telling them not to be afraid that Jesus was already gone having been raised. Then, after telling them to look at where the body had been and was no longer, he told them what they were to do. They were to go to the disciples, and Peter, and tell them that Jesus was going ahead to Galilee where they would see him again. So the women, Mark says, "fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them." Then he claims, "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Mark said that the women ran away and said nothing to anyone for they were afraid. Really? And just how, then, would Mark explain the fact that we are all sitting here this morning, some of you here in the church and

others joining us from home via broadcast? If those women never told anyone, how is it that 2000 years later Christianity is the largest religion in the world? If those women simply fled and told no one, we would not be here. How can I say that? How can I claim that Mark got this part of the story wrong? Easy! We're here and we wouldn't be if the women hadn't done exactly as they were instructed. And we know they did because the three other Gospel versions of this event were not written down until as much as 30-40 years after Mark wrote his. Mark's is the oldest Gospel, written down roughly 30 years after these events transpired. The women had to have said something or the other Gospel accounts would not exist because no one would have known what happened to Jesus. Important to note is that later scribes tried to fix this error in Mark by adding their own endings to the story, making it more like the other accounts in Matthew, Luke and John. You can see it in their own endings to the story. Each of the Gospel accounts are a little different – different women, different accounts of how the tomb came to be opened – but they all agree it was the women who were the first witnesses to the Resurrection and the first to spread the news of the Risen Christ.

So, what's up with Mark? Why would his ending be so different from the other Gospel accounts? Well, for one reason, in the years just after the Resurrection, the time period when Mark was writing, all the followers of Jesus expected him to come back again and initiate the return of the kingdom of God to earth. If Jesus was coming back any day, it really didn't matter whether or not the women said anything because Jesus would be back to set everything straight himself any moment. And we can't overlook that it was the women who had been the first witnesses. It was the women who received the news of this unexpected next chapter of Jesus' life and ministry and for Mark, that would never do because, after all, they were just women. It could not possibly be the case that God had picked them to be the first to hear the Good News and be the ones to share it first. Yes, Mark reminds us that efforts to silence women have been around forever!

Nevertheless, it makes sense that the women did flee from the tomb. What they saw scared the heck out of them and they ran. We get that. We know what it's like to be scared and overwhelmed. Our Covid year just ending taught us that lesson very, very well. We've endured an

unimaginable year facing everything from toilet paper shortages to being afraid to touch anything anywhere ever for fear of becoming sick with a strange disease no one seemed to understand that was killing a whole lot of people, some of them people we knew and loved. We know what it is to be scared and feeling trapped, not knowing what would be the next scary thing to happen. We also are beginning to understand what it means to be at the point of being released from our Covid tombs. Make no mistake, the last year when we have been stuck inside our homes, fearing going out to tackle the most mundane task like putting gas in the car, has been a very tomb-like experience. Oh, we could see the world passing by as we watched endless hours of television and spent way too much time on social media. We witnessed the growing reluctance to listen to the medical professionals as they explained why our tomb-like existence was necessary so that our temporary tombs didn't become permanent ones. We ventured out as we needed to, donning our own tomb reminders in the facemasks we now wear religiously. Yes, we know what it's like to be scared like we have never been scared before. And we know what it's like to be standing on the inside of that tomb door just waiting for it to be rolled back. We are so ready to be fleeing our own tombs just as soon as we can!

And that is exactly what makes this current time we are in so very fraught. We so desperately want to jump into tomb fleeing mode big time and yet we can't. Not yet. Too many people remain unvaccinated. Too many remain skeptical and even fearful of the vaccine and as a result all of our own tomb fleeing is being slowed down. But, we'll get there. We will. Of that I have no doubt. In the meantime, we have a little unexpected time to ponder just what our post-tomb, post-Covid lives will be like. We have the luxury of being able to take stock of what were some good things that came out of our Covid tomb year and what were the bad things we definitely do not want to repeat. We can take the time to chat with each other and maybe even with that angel hanging out in the tomb to tell us what's up as we figure out what our own next steps should be, here in the church and in our lives outside the church. We have the great gift of a little time to consider, carefully and prayerfully, who it is each of us would like to become in our post-Covid lives. Maybe it is time to look for new beginnings and fresh starts. Maybe it is time to reconsider how we invest our time.

Maybe it's time to do just what the young man told the women to do as their first priority, "go, tell" people about the difference Jesus has made in your life during the pandemic. Maybe it's time to go, tell others how the church was still here for you in spite of everything that conspired to close our doors but NOT dampen our message of faith to each other and to the community, NOT dampen our love for each other, NOT dampen our witness that Jesus lives and prayer works when we trust God's answers. Maybe, just maybe, it's time as we flee our Covid tomb to run back to Jesus and the church, in search of what it is God needs us to be doing in this post Covid world. Maybe, just maybe, it's time to be the people God always knew we could be, the people God needs us to be, right here and right now in our own little corner of the world.

Dear ones, our message of hope and new life possible through a Risen Christ is so needed in the world outside our doors. Our rainbow flags are testimony that we indeed welcome everyone and that is so needed right now. Dear ones, now is the time and we are the people God needs to make a difference in the world, right now. Are you with me? I sure hope so... Let's continue the conversation about how we do that as we journey beyond our Covid tomb together. Amen.

And now, I would like us to mark this new beginning in the life of our beloved church by dedicating our new Worship & Rejoice Hymnals as an act of faith that though we cannot yet use them to sing each week, we can get ready to sing our loud and strong when the time is right!

Prayer of dedication (ask people to stand)

O God of Easter and Christmas, of baptisms and confirmations, of weddings and funerals, of all those moments when songs of faith touch our souls in ways nothing else does, we ask your presence here this morning as we dedicate these new hymnals. We give you thanks and praise for all those for whom they were given as memorial gifts and for those for whom they were given in celebration. Bless these hymnals and us in our singing. Fill us with patience as we wait for the day to use them in our worship of you. In Jesus name we pray. Amen.