

“Crucifixion & Resurrection”

A sermon by the Rev. Susan Bjork
Bay Shore Community Congregational Church – September 4, 2022
Lesson: Mark 16:1-8

Gracious God, in this time of worship and reflection let us tune our hearts to the rhythm of your life-giving, renewing, resurrecting love. May your Spirit bring us wisdom. And may your compassionate presence be felt in this gathered community and in our daily living. Amen.

Every Sunday is a little Easter. Sunday is the day of resurrection and that is why our ancestors in faith chose to worship on Sundays. So, here we are celebrating Easter in September! If you can have Christmas in July, why not Easter in September? So... Christ is Risen! He is risen, indeed!

As we continue our exploration of the important stories of our faith, we must consider the central story of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ and reflect on what it means for us. Without it, our religious tradition would not have unfolded over time in the way it has.

I've chosen to center our exploration of this topic in Mark's telling of the story. The gospels have a lot of common material in their stories of the crucifixion and resurrection, but they also include some unique elements, including various appearances of the Risen Christ. Most biblical scholars agree that Mark is the oldest gospel, and it's original ending (which we heard this morning) leaves a lot unsaid and a lot to our imagination and interpretation. I find that intriguing and I hope you do too.

But, before we get to the resurrection account, let's back up a bit and revisit the events that led up to this point.

After Jesus' betrayal by Judas and arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane, Mark tells us that all of Jesus' disciples deserted him and fled. Only Peter cautiously followed at a distance as Jesus was taken and interrogated before the temple authorities. And, as I'm sure you remember, as he followed, Peter denied knowing Jesus three times before dawn, just as Jesus said he would.

The fear and flight of the disciples is significant and also totally understandable given the danger they faced.

Jesus was then handed over to the Roman Governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, who had him flogged and then condemned him to death by crucifixion. Whether or not any in the gathered crowd supported this decision, only a Roman authority could crucify someone. It was a punishment generally reserved for enemies of the state, traitors who threatened Roman power. But it was also quite common. And crucified bodies were made to be public signposts telling the people to stay in line or face the same fate.

It was probably Jesus' public acts of non-violent resistance to the empire and its local collaborators that got him into trouble with Rome – the Palm Sunday protest march and then turning over the tables of the moneychangers in the temple. It didn't necessarily take a big uprising to get in trouble, especially during Passover when the city was packed with pilgrims and anti-imperial sentiment was strong.

The Roman soldiers beat and mocked Jesus before dragging him to Golgotha and crucifying him. “King of the Jews” was the charge they hung above his head. According to Mark, passersby derided and taunted him, as did the two bandits who were crucified beside him.

At noon, Mark says, darkness spread across the land as Jesus cried out in despair the opening words of Psalm 22, “my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” and took his last breath. At his death, says Mark, the temple curtain was torn in two and a Roman centurion’s eyes were opened as he proclaimed, “truly this man was God’s Son.”

All of these accompanying signs, the darkness, the temple curtain tearing, and the centurion’s change of heart likely serve to point to the weight and importance of this event, not only for Jesus’ contemporary followers, but for the generations to come.

It was common in the ancient world for people to claim that cosmological events accompanied the deaths of great leaders. The Romans themselves also claimed that the sun grew dark when Julius Caesar died.

The tearing of the temple curtain might symbolize several things for Mark – that God is elsewhere at this moment, God’s grief, foreshadowing the full destruction of temple that would later take place in the year 70.

And, tragically too late, the centurion, a Roman soldier, an enemy and oppressor of the Jewish people, recognizes the goodness of the one his empire has put to death. And not only that, he calls him the name the Romans called their own emperors – Son of God. That’s a pretty radical statement for anyone, especially a centurion.

And finally, for the first time, Mark then names some of the women who were in Jesus’ community of followers from Galilee, including Mary Magdalene. They alone remain to witness the crucifixion, long after all of the male disciples had already fled.

As the eve of the Sabbath day was now approaching, a sympathetic Joseph of Arimathea asks Pilate for Jesus’ body and lays it in the tomb. And the women see where the body was laid, setting the stage for the next scene.

Just after dawn on Sunday, they go to the tomb and find that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. Instead of Jesus’ body which they had planned to anoint, they find a young man dressed in white, an angel, a messenger who tells them he is not here; he has been raised. He instructs them to go and tell the disciples and then return to Galilee – there they will see him.

But, instead of proclaiming this amazing good news, they are seized by fear and amazement and say nothing.

And that’s how the gospel originally ended. The oldest manuscripts stop there. Only later were stories of resurrection appearances and the ascension added on by editors who were dissatisfied with this original ending.

Now, Mark’s original audience would have assumed that the women ultimately said something or they wouldn’t be there hearing this story (and neither would we). The story of resurrection spread. We know that. And, eventually, the stories of resurrection appearances became part of the gospels.

But, for a moment, pretend that you don't know those other stories. What might be your reaction to this ending? Do you wonder what happened next? What does it ask of you, as a modern disciple?

On one hand, the fearful silence of the women echoes the fear and flight of the male disciples. So, it might not be that surprising to hear that they were too shocked to speak at first.

This abrupt ending also serves as an invitation to faith. The Gospel of Mark takes seriously the fear and failings of the disciples. And yet, it also doesn't give up on them. Despite the fact that they fled; despite the fact that Peter denied knowing Jesus; they are still deserving of the good news of resurrection. And they, along with the women at the tomb, are called to go back to Galilee and see what's in store for them next as disciples.

Go to Galilee; there you will see the Risen Christ, said the angel. That is an invitation to us too. Ever since I first encountered a commentator who made the case that the ending of the Gospel of Mark intentionally invites us, the reader, to go back to the beginning, I've always read this ending as an invitation. Go back to Galilee. Go back to the beginning. Re-read the whole gospel, the whole story of Jesus, with your Easter glasses on – there you will see God's resurrecting power not only at the end of Jesus' life, but all through his life, mission, and ministry – all along he was bearing God's resurrecting power in his teaching, in his healing, in his gathering of a community and calling them to continue the mission after he was gone.

All we have to do to encounter the Risen Christ is to go back to Galilee, back to the beginning of the gospel, and live the story again and again until it becomes our story, until we see ourselves in those disciples, in those who are taught, in those who are healed, in that growing community that is called to follow in the Way of Jesus and to take up our own crosses sometimes (as he instructed us), despite our fear, and to use this one precious life we have been given to bear the good news of God's undying love and resurrecting power into our world.

The story of the resurrection of Jesus Christ isn't just something that happened a long time ago. Living this story is what keeps it alive today. That's why we revisit it every Lent and Easter. And that's why every Sunday is also an opportunity to celebrate a little Easter.

The violence, hate, and injustice that crucified Jesus drove his disciples, those nearest and dearest to him, to hide away in fear and silence. But that was not the end of their story. Jesus is raised. His mission, ministry, and life itself is vindicated by God. And the fear and silence of the disciples is turned upside down too and transformed into faith, into growing community, and into lives that boldly and courageously proclaim the love of God in word and deed.

This transformation, this resurrecting power of God, is our story too. It's there for us too. Even in our suffering, fear, doubt, silence, and despair, God can find us. None of us can get so far away that we cannot be touched by God's healing presence and deep love.

After all, the cross reveals to us that God understands our deepest suffering, our deepest despair. God was there with Jesus, even when he felt forsaken and cried out in desperation. God was with Jesus every step of the way.

Jesus ultimately gave his own life in commitment to the Kingdom of God, as he understood it, with compassion and deep love for his people. But I don't believe he did this because God demanded a

sacrifice as payment for the sins of humanity. I can't reconcile that idea with the love and grace of God that Jesus illustrated in his life and ministry.

Instead, I think Jesus was willing to stand up to the powers of evil and injustice in this world and expose them for what they are. I do believe he felt called by God to follow that hard path of nonviolent resistance (as Pastor Dave mentioned last week), even to the point of putting his own body on the line. I think that was at the heart of his prayerful struggle in Gethsemane. And his crucifixion reveals the sins of this world and exposes the futility and corruption of systems of domination that oppress and kill in order to protect their own power.

The crucifixion ought to cause us to look both inward to our own heart's deepest longings and outward into our world. Now, as much as ever, we must ask ourselves what kind of lives we want to live and what kind of world we want to work towards together. Will we choose to build each other up or tear each other down? Will we work for the good of all or support systems that privilege a few at the expense of the rest? If we are committed to love of our neighbors (and even our enemies), if we are committed to seeking justice and peace for all, then we must reject the mechanisms of empire that hurt, crucify, and kill bodies and spirits that are beloved of our God who created us all.

And the good news of resurrection brings us help and hope in this journey. God was with Jesus through crucifixion and brought new life on the other side. God said yes to Jesus and no to empire. Violence and death are not the end of the story. Not our mortal death and not the smaller, yet significant endings, failures, and metaphorical deaths we all experience in this life.

Instead of endings, God brings new beginnings over and over again. Hope lives. Christ is Risen! And the good news of God's resurrecting power and the promise of new life that bursts forth can bring us courage – the courage to face the toughest times we must face in this life (including our own mortality and that of our loved ones), the courage to stay in the struggle for a better future for all people and for this very planet, the courage to step out in faith and follow where Jesus leads.

And when we find ourselves struggling, facing the same fear, doubt, despair, and desire to flee, as Jesus' beloved and imperfect disciples did, perhaps we should heed the advice of the Gospel of Mark and return to Galilee.

Jesus' story of love, teaching, healing, community-making, and proclaiming God's abundant grace is there for us whenever we need it. May it remind us that the Risen Christ is here with us, that God's resurrecting, transforming, life-giving power is ever-present and being revealed in our midst, in our very lives, in this very community, in this world (despite its messiness and complexity).

So, let us follow in faith and trust, for Christ is Risen! He is Risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Amen.