

Easter is Never Too Early

A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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March 31, 2024

SCRIPTURE READING: Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he 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. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.' <sup>8</sup>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.

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Prayer

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Sorry folks, be patient with me this morning, I woke up late. I don't have my sermon finished, I'm going to need just another couple of minutes. Talk amongst yourselves, I'm almost there....

Lemme just go back to the Bible passage one more time....

When the sabbath was over...yep, yep...

The stone was rolled away...got it...

“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.”

Huh.

Isn't there usually more there?

Mairi, I'm going to need you to do a read back for me. What's your printout say?

(Mairi responds with the same ending:) “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.”

Now what am I going to do with that? Mark ends too early.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> So much so that in the 2nd century people added additional verses.

Matter of fact, Easter is too early this year. It's like the 10th earliest Easter in a century.

I mean it's still cold outside. The forsythia is still trembling. And the daffodils on the chancel haven't even opened yet. Haiti's a catastrophe, Ukraine is still being invaded, people are starving in Gaza, the Key Bridge collapse... It's just too early to be Easter. Half of us haven't even gotten back from the cross yet.

Listen, here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to postpone Easter by six weeks. Six weeks should be plenty. I'll have more time to finish my sermon, and it'll be much easier to get brunch reservations. Okay? So go home, put the Easter Bonnets back in their boxes, hide the chocolate. Let's come back in six weeks and we'll pick all of this back up where we leave off. Sound good?

No?

You're convinced we should stick with Easter being today? Alright.

(Looks at the Bible again.)

As I return to the text this morning, I'm noticing something.

"very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen..."

Christ rose pretty early in the morning!

By the time the women arrived - and they arrived early, just as the sun was coming up - the tomb was already empty, the stone was already rolled away, Christ had already started off to Galilee.

So Easter might feel pretty early this year, but that first Easter morning started so early that none of Jesus' followers were there to see the actual moment.

Early in the morning.

Before dawn.

Easter arrived early and it turns out that was right on time.

Easter arrived early and shook everything up. Jesus was dead, they all knew it, and his followers were early in their grieving, but the women knew what it meant to grieve. There was a pattern to the first few days of grief. They came to tenderly care for his body. But the empty tomb interrupted their grief. Easter arrived early and shook everything up.

The young man in white, an angel, perhaps, said those beautiful words that are the most common in scripture:

Don't be alarmed. Don't be afraid. Fear not.

We all know how well things go when you tell terrified people, fear not. It took them a minute to catch up. But we know they did. We know they got past their fear and found their voice, because we know the end of the story. Mark might end early but we know the rest of the story. Because the women told it, and Christ's followers had encounters in Galilee and Jerusalem, and they told it.

We know the story didn't end, because the Christian movement didn't end at the empty tomb: in fact the Christian movement began at the empty tomb. So the story's ending was what everyone knew, what the other Gospels told us, and what every reader of Mark would know: that's not how the song ended. They knew Mark had left off the part with the appearances of the risen Christ, because the resurrection story was what brought them to faith. Early in the morning, the tomb was empty. To a community in pain, early in the morning, the tomb was empty. Easter wasn't too early. It was right on time.

The women got up, and went out, and "told someone who told someone, who told someone else, who told a lot of people, because 40 years later Mark is writing the Gospel. And nearly 2000 years later we are here believing it and sharing it..." (Cynthia Campbell, 30 Good Minutes)

If you look at Mark closely, you can see they always intended their Gospel to end early. Mark starts, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ." Mark tells us, this is not the whole story. There's an invitation, you know, in this early ending. Mark's early ending means we can't be passive this Easter because we've got to proclaim the rest of the good news.<sup>2</sup>

Mark ends early, so we are called to go out and tell the good news. We are called to go out and follow the way of the Resurrected Christ. We are called to go out and love so much that the people we meet experience new life.

When Easter is early, when Mark ends early, when there is a gap between the text and our moment, we bridge the gap with our good news. The rest of the story is ours to tell. We've got to tell it. We've got to live it for today.

Mark's sudden ending compels us to respond. To move. To go. Not to stay silent. Now what? Mark has just told us: Go tell Christ's followers they will see the risen Christ! And if you want to do that in 2024 you embody love, you cry justice, you speak hope, you say Christ is risen indeed.

Mark ends early as an invitation for us to complete the story. To "walk our way through our fear, and become the community of believers..." (Megan McKenna, quoted in Sojourners Magazine April 2009)

Easter might feel pretty early, but Christ got up early...early in the morning, while it was still dark.

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"Because it [the ending of Mark] demands a readerly resolution, it subverts the possibility of a glorified Christology which might render the community passive." Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, p. 408

Easter might feel pretty early, but Christ has gotten an early start, and is already on the way to Galilee. We'd better get an early start if we want to catch up.

“But God raised Christ up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for love to be held in death’s power.” (Acts 2:24, adapted)

Siblings, it is not too early at all for Easter’s word that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

It’s early, but it’s not too early.

Because for our neighbors, it’s not too early to say, can I help?  
For the world, it’s not too early to cry Peace.

For the one who despairs, it’s not too early to say, Love is stronger than death.

For creation it’s not too early to say I’ll be part of the healing.  
For the ground still cold from winter, it’s not too early for the flowers to break forth.

For the one who grieves it’s not too early to say I’m here.  
For the one who has given up, it’s not too early to give hope.

For the one who is alone, it’s not too early to say, I see you.

For the one who thinks the ending is going to be terrible, it’s not too early to say: the Tomb could not hold him, and it can’t hold you either.

For anyone who feels like it's still Friday, it's not too early to say: *the worst thing is never the last thing*. (Fred Buechner's classic Easter quote.)

This Easter is not too early at all. This Easter is right on time.

Christ is risen! Christ is Risen indeed. Christ is risen, right on time.  
Hallelujah, Hallelujah, Amen!



“Cling to me in my hour of need, O promised resurrection. Reveal to me the power of your undefeated love.” Miriam Therese Winter, WomanWord p 161

### Benediction

Do not be afraid. Go out into the world, loving and living in the name of Jesus Christ, and you will meet the Risen Savior, for Christ has gone ahead of us. Christ is leading the way for us. Christ has opened the gates of heaven for us. Go, and tell the world, God’s steadfast love endures forever! Hallelujah, Amen.

Bless our hands to your service,  
Our feet to your path,  
Our hearts to your purpose, our spirits to dwell in the depths of your Spirit.  
For your glory now and forever. Miriam Therese Winter WomanWord.