

**Easter Irony**  
**A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr**  
**First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – March 31, 2024**

**Please Read:**  
**Acts 10:34-43**  
**Mark 16:1-8**

The gospel is full of irony... the long-awaited savior born not to some Caesar, but a Nazarean peasant girl, born not in a palace, but a barn, not in a golden crib but a feeding trough. Who doesn't see irony in Jesus' teaching, "Blessed are the poor," and "the first shall be last"? Or, this holy week with Jesus' triumphal entry on a donkey; the crown of thorns? The gospel according to Mark is full of irony, with only Jesus' enemies and evil spirits understanding and acknowledging who he is. According to Mark, the disciples never quite figured it out...

The Easter story is familiar, and we think we know it well. Mark records the women going to the tomb and finding it empty. He tells of the young man in a white robe who says Jesus is risen and that they will encounter him in Galilee. But then Mark adds this concluding sentence: "*So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*" That's it. This work, called a gospel - that is, an account of good news - ends with the word *afraid*.

What an odd way to end the story. No wonder some scholars have theorized that the original last lines were lost. No wonder, too, that in the second century longer and seemingly more appropriate endings were added, the most familiar of which is included in many translations of the text as verses 9-20, sometimes as a footnote and other times simply as part of the text. From early on, Christians have not known what to do with the original ending, the only consensus being that it is awkward to leave Mark's ending alone, with the word *afraid* as the last word...

How are we to respond to this? Well, I'm grateful for the other gospel accounts because they add important elements not found in Mark's Gospel. After all, the gospel writers are attempting to capture an event of such mystery and magnitude that it cannot be summarized from any single perspective. But I am grateful for Mark's Gospel and the way it ends because, though it may not tell the *whole* story, it reveals an important perspective on the truth of the gospel, however ironic...

That perspective can be summarized *that the Good News is also frightening*. We who come to worship on Easter morning already knowing what we are going to hear, having heard it many times before, can lose sight of this. Nothing stills fear more than familiarity. But that is all the more reason we need to hear the words afresh, so they may startle, rock our little boats; even frighten us again.

So, let's consider why Mark's account has these women respond as they do... On a very basic level, the news that a dead man is now alive and is going to meet you is, in itself, a frightening notion. You don't need to be Stephen Spielberg or Stephen King to recognize the Zombie potential for fear in such a declaration. On another level, we know that when Jesus was captured and left to hang in agony in the dark, his followers scattered in every direction like a flock of frightened birds. Now he's back, and they don't know what kind of mood he's in! They do not know yet that the *risen* Christ is also the *forgiving* Christ. Not yet...

But I think there's more to it. At another level, what the women have been told - if it is true - is the best news they could receive. The resurrection means that evil, even the cowardice, self-service, betraying faithlessness within themselves, is not ultimately triumphant. It means that a tomb is not a dead end, that in the deepest darkness of our existence, there still shines a light that cannot be overcome. It means God really does keep promises and does not take our "no" for an answer. It means God is the kind of God who insists on having the last word, and that last word is a loving word of hope, of healing, of reconciliation and new life!

It is significant that it was *this* Jesus who God raised from the dead, not some Nietzschean Promethian superhuman, but a *suffering servant*, the one who went out to the outcasts and sinners of society to show God's mercy and compassion. *This crucified Christ* is the one God vindicated and raised from the dead.

The women do not yet know if the news they heard is true. But either way, their lives will never be the same again. The news that the women hear at the empty tomb is frightening because either way, *their lives are forever changed*.

Little wonder, then, that Mark has the women ironically flee from the declaration that Jesus has been raised. If what they heard is true, then the world is turned upside down, and everything that isn't bolted down comes loose! ...

We sometimes talk wistfully about wanting change in the world and in our lives. But then we hold on to the familiar as if for dear life. We are not willing to let go, even if letting go means giving us the opportunity to grab hold of a new and wondrous reality. The familiar has great appeal. Even if the familiar has its disappointments, those disappointments are already well known and well worn. We become attached to the contours of our lives, and we can even become attached to our worst fears and neuroses. We hesitate to give them up. Isn't it said, "A known evil is better than an unknown good?"

That is perhaps what C.S. Lewis had in mind when he wrote, “The Christian Religion is, in the long run, a thing of unspeakable comfort. But it does not begin in comfort; it begins in dismay, and it is no use at all trying to go on to the comfort without first going through that illusion and dismay.”

We can talk so glibly about wanting some sure encounter with God that will dispel our doubts, or about wanting to feel closer to God in our daily lives. But Mark won't let us get away with that. The presence of God in our lives is not always easier than God's absence, and in some ways, it is a far sight more difficult. It can be nothing short of frightening at times.

Frederick Buechner, one of my favorite authors, was at a dinner with a group of pastors, and one posed this question to the group: “If you could meet anyone in history, who would it be?” Responses varied. Someone said Solomon. Another said St. Paul. Another said Mary. Then someone pointed out the curious fact that among these Christian pastors, no one said they wanted to see Jesus. Fred immediately responded: “No, oh no...I would dissolve into a puddle of tears.”

Confronting Jesus on Easter morning is a joyous event as Matthew, Luke and John all bear witness. But it can also be frightening as Mark gives testimony. Among other things, confronting the powerful presence of God in the resurrected Christ reminds us that life is more mysterious than we usually recognize and how we live our lives is more significant than we usually let ourselves imagine.

There may be many reasons for running away from the resurrection. In a world of senseless violence like Ukraine and Gaza, or Moscow terrorist attacks, or the loss of a loved one... there is plenty of room to question a loving all powerful God. We may choose to walk away because of doubt. And the dimensions of the Easter story are so huge, it leaves room for considerable doubt. But if we run from resurrection, something besides doubt may also be upon us.

Often those who run away from Easter are not so much propelled by their doubts as they are by the frightening realization that *it just might be true*. We run away only if we take seriously enough the implications of this powerful good news. After all, there is no impulse to run from something that is easily dismissed.

According to Mark in his savory irony, the women at the empty tomb are told, “He has been raised; he is not here... 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.” It is no wonder they were frightened, *because it just might be true.*

And if it is true, then you just might have to do something about it. You might have to live a different life, or receive a new one... a life living with the deep irony of Easter joy in the midst of sadness and grief; with wild hope in the face of despair, with humble faith that death will not have the last word; a life of forgiveness and self-giving love because paradoxically, God’s strength is revealed in weakness; God’s love still brings new life even out of a tomb...

Consider where you need to run for Easter new life? Like the children who will enjoy the Easter Egg Hunt shortly, sometimes resurrection new life requires searching. If you do run, I invite you to run first to this sacrament, and receive the mysterious and at times frightening body and blood of God’s crucified-risen love. As ironic as it may be, here are signs of God’s love for you and resurrection power to transform even fear into faith, hope, and love!

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*