

# “Christ Is Risen”

Rev. Dr. David Holyan  
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, April 1, 2018

## Isaiah 25:6-9

*On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.  
And he will destroy on this mountain  
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  
the sheet that is spread over all nations;  
he will swallow up death for ever.  
Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,  
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  
for the Lord has spoken.  
It will be said on that day,  
Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.  
This is the Lord for whom we have waited;  
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.*

## 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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?' When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 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. 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.' 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.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to you and to the power of your holy spirit. I pray on this Easter Sunday that you would take all that we have within, our words, our worries, our joys. Those things that are distracting us. I pray that you would take the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard read from the Prophet and from the gospel, especially the words that you've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these into the living word of Jesus Christ, and let that word do its work within us, providing us the encouragement that we need to be faithful. Let that word provide comfort to those places in our lives where we are hurting, and let that word challenge us in our comforts and invite us to serve our neighbors in need. We ask this in the faithful name of the risen one, Jesus Christ our Lord, now and forever. Amen.

This is the 11th Easter sermon that I've preached from this pulpit. In prior years, I've always chosen for this Sunday the Gospel of John. For one thing, the Gospel of John is my favorite gospel for a lot of reasons, but I love the end of John's gospel where the women go to the tomb and Mary stays and is wandering around asking, "Do you know where they put

him? Do you know where they put him?" And she sees someone that looks like a gardener and she says, "Sir, do you know where they've put my Lord?" And he says, "No. I don't know where they put him. Who are you looking for?" And she says she's looking for Jesus and finally he looks at her and says, "Mary," and she recognizes him and goes, "Oh," and then goes to give him a big old hug and he says, "Oh, time out. don't hang on. I'm not done. But go tell the disciples." And she runs off and tells everybody. And it's a great story, right? Because at Easter, we want to hear a story where we know that Jesus is alive, He's risen from the dead, and it's right there in the story. Jesus encountering Mary.

So last summer when I was going through the text to preach for this year, I decided well, I'm going to try Mark. I've not done that ever. And I just picked Mark and away it goes. And then this Monday I come to the text and I start to read it and I go, "Uh-oh. There's no Jesus in this story." Instead, at the end of it, there are three women who run out of the tomb with terror and amazement grabbing at them. They say nothing to anyone and they are afraid. Sure, the messenger says, "Oh. Don't worry. You're looking for that teacher guy who was crucified. He's been raised. He's not here. He's already gone on ahead of you." So we know by the sort of the flow of the passage that Jesus has raised from the dead, but we do not encounter the living Christ in this passage.

And so I had the words of my seminary professor sort of coursing through me all week long. In one of our very first preaching classes he stood before us and said, "You must make a decision. Are you going to preach the holiday schedule, or are you going to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ?" And we all sat there going, "Well of course we're preaching the gospel." And then he said, "Yeah. But what about on Mother's Day? Are you going to talk about how great moms are?" "No. We're going to preach the gospel." "Well you'd better talk about how great moms are [laughter]. What about Father's Day? Are you going to--?" "Oh. Okay. Well we'll preach about it. We'll talk about how great fathers are." "Oh no, no, no. You'd better preach the gospel every Sunday." And we're like, "Okay, wait. What are you trying to tell us?" He's telling us that each time we have to make a decision. Where do we go with the holiday, or the emphasis of the day, the Sunday, and what the text is giving us? I never imagined that he would say that about Easter Sunday. Easter Sunday, where when, I don't know about you, but when I walk around, I have every human being I see say to me, "He is risen." And my response is, "He is risen indeed. He is risen indeed. He is risen to-- whoa [laughter]." Because that's what we're celebrating. We're celebrating that Jesus' work on the cross is finished. His victory is complete. The sting of death has been removed. And we are forgiven and set free. Hallelujah! Amen!

And then there's that pesky thing called the Bible where three women do not run out and say, "His work is finished. The tomb is empty. He is risen. Let us celebrate. Amen." No. Instead they run out because fear and terror has captured them. They don't say anything to anybody because they are afraid. And so all week I've sat in prayer going, "What do I do with this?" One of the greatest blessings of my job as the pastor here is that during the week I get to take my cup of coffee from my desk and walk into Karen's office and say, "Do you have a minute [laughter]?" And most of the time, to be completely honest, because it is Easter, we end up talking about you. No, I'm just kidding [laughter]. No. We talk about whatever it is that's going on in the life of the church, but a lot of times our conversation moves to a theological perspective. And each of us in our own way appreciate the gift of grace and mercy. We have both a sense of inclusion and openness about what God's doing in the world. And I recall that in most of our conversations, at least from my side of it, that I've always viewed the opposite of faith to be fear, which is why I love all of the passages in the scriptures, old and new, that begin with an angel coming to someone, saying, "Do not be afraid." And I think, "Oh, that's because that person doesn't have faith yet, and they just need to not be afraid, and everything will be okay."

In fact, one of my favorite passages that I often use for my own prayer and devotional time is when Gabriel shows up to Mary. I imagine myself being Mary and having this angel of the Lord show up and say, "Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. You have found favor with God." Some of you that have come to me for prayer or pastoral concern have heard me offer those words back to you. I am convinced they are some of the richest and most profound words in all of scripture. If we can only believe and trust that we have found favor in God's sight, that we are the chosen ones, and that we need not be afraid, how different life might be. And so I come back to this text, the text where these three women have this amazing encounter with a messenger who says to them, "Do not be alarmed. The one you're looking for who's crucified has been raised. He's not here." And instead of embracing that message and carrying it to the world, they run away in fear. And I came to a realization this week. I realized that fear is not the opposite of faith. It's the beginning of faith, that the gospel story, all of it, from Mark 1 all the way until the end, is about setting us up to have an encounter with a living God. And to me, in an amazing way, the fact that the gospel of Mark ends here with them being afraid, it takes fear and it redeems it for us. As crazy as it sounds, we do not need to be afraid of fear.

Because from those things of which we are afraid, new life will spring forth. Today, Easter Sunday, here with the music and our songs, we celebrate that ending point, the finish line, the alleluia of what God is doing. And in an amazing way, the Gospel writers, or the committee that chose this passage, have decided to also emphasize the starting line of this race. You start with fear and uncertainty, and you move all the way to the Hallelujah Chorus. Those of you that know me well know that I have some, let's just say, peculiar hobbies, if you will [laughter]. I like to make fly rods, and tie flies, and shoot skeet, and do other things. But one of the things I love the most every October is I love to sit down in front of the television and watch the Ironman World Championship from Kona, Hawaii. I don't know why [laughter]. If you hear an amen, that is my wife saying, "Yes, he does." I imagine myself being fit enough to swim all that way, crawling over bodies, and getting out of the water, and getting on one of those \$250,000 bicycles that are made out of carbon fiber that's thinner than whatever, and it weighs half an ounce. And I'm racing my 56 miles away from the shore, across the black lava fields with the heat shimmering off the road, on my way to the Energy Lab to do the big turnaround and then come back. I make my way all the way back, and then I see myself shifting into my running shoes and putting on my fanny pack with water and my visor, and off I go on a marathon, right? Yeah. Just like those pros do it. They're done before I would be out of the water [laughter]. I get that.

But I don't really watch it for them, for the pros who are spectacularly fit and do amazing things. I watch it for what's called the age groupers. The age groupers are people like you and me who make it in somehow. And they are just trying to survive. Their ultimate goal is to cross the line, to hear someone say their name and say, "You are an Ironman." To have people come up and embrace them and put a lei around their neck. This race goes so long that many of these age groupers end up having wristbands and glow sticks that they carry through the night, trying to get to the finish line before the clock times them out. And maybe you've seen these people as they come to finish. Some of them are just--their bodies are done, and they're staggering all over. And I'm sitting on the couch, literally couch potato, sitting on the couch going, "Fall forward. You'll finish. Make sure you fall forward. Don't go back." And they fall forward. They make it. People swoop in, lift them up, and wah! The place goes crazy.

That's us today. We're celebrating that, that finish line that all of us can go, "Yes." But the text wants us to remember where we start, that it's okay for us to be afraid. It's okay for us to have doubts. It's okay for us to wonder what God might be up to in our lives because the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ was not just one thing one time. The power of that event is now available to each of us by the power of the spirit. And so every time we come to that fearful place and we are wondering, "Should I step across and do something, or should I just stay put?", I think what the spirit is saying today is, "Take the step. New life lies ahead. Do not be afraid. He is risen. He is risen indeed." Amen.