

Church of the Crossroads
Easter Sunday
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NOT AN ANSWER BUT AN INVITATION

Mark 16:1-8

There is something in us that likes answers. We human beings do not like to live with questions. This is true in everyday matters, but it is also true when it comes to religious faith. Religiously, we want answers. Perhaps we have come to this service hoping that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead might be such an answer to life's deeper problems – the problem of human suffering and death itself, or the degradation of the earth, or the problem of injustice in our world with its tragic toll on human life and dignity.

In anticipation, we wait to hear the Gospel account of the resurrection appointed for today. This year it is from Mark Chapter 16, the first eight verses. Although there are more verses attached to this Gospel of Mark, the original Gospel, it is believed by many, ended with the eighth verse. The account begins. We hear about the women coming to the tomb and wondering whether there will be someone there to roll away the stone blocking its entrance. And then we hear how they encounter a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side. They are alarmed, naturally, but the young man tells them not to be afraid. He goes on to tell them that Jesus, who was crucified, has been raised, that he is no longer here. They are to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of them all to Galilee. It is there that they will see him. And now the concluding verse:

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.

That's it. The entire Gospel ends with the word *afraid*. The answer we had hoped for simply is not there. We feel cheated, and disappointed. We thought that we would be given an answer, a solution, an ending. Instead we are left with a feeling of uncertainty and bewilderment.

In a recent issue of *The Christian Century*, Thomas Long recalls the late Donald Juel's Commentary on the Gospel of Mark. In his commentary, Juel tells the story of one of his students who had succeeded in memorizing the whole of Mark's Gospel in order to do a dramatic reading before a live audience. The student took seriously the growing scholarly consensus that the Gospel did indeed end with the women running away, filled with terror and fear. At the end of his first performance, after he repeated the eighth verse, he stood there awkwardly, shifting from one foot to the other. The audience waited for more, for closure and a proper ending. Finally, after several anxious moments, the student said "Amen" and made his exit. The relieved audience applauded loudly and enthusiastically. The student reflected further, and realized that he had betrayed the intention of the author of Mark's Gospel, and so, for his second performance, he decided not to say "Amen" and give his audience the satisfying conclusion they wanted. This time, at the conclusion of his performance, the student simply paused a moment and walked off the stage in silence. "The discomfort and uncertainty within the audience were obvious," recalled Donald Juel, "and as people exited . . . the buzz of conversation was dominated by the experience of the non-ending."

The resurrection of Jesus is not an answer to all that troubles us. It is not the ending we desire. It is not a solution to the reality of death and human suffering. It does not wipe out the reality of Good Friday in our lives or in the life of the world. Nor is the resurrection something we can grasp. It is not something we can possess. Its truth is always larger than the measure of our minds. It is not something we can own. It can only be lived.

Rather than believing that the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the answer to all of life's problems, it might be better for us human beings to live the questions themselves, as the poet Rainer Maria Rilke once suggested.

*Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart
and try to live the questions themselves
as if they were locked rooms
or books written in a foreign language.
Do not search for the answers, which could not
be given to you now,
because you would not be able to live with them.
And the point is, to live everything.*

*Live the questions now.
Perhaps, then, someday in the future,
you will gradually, without even noticing it,
live your way into the answer.*

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead is not an answer but an invitation. The resurrection is an invitation to faith, to a trust in God's presence and leading in our lives and in the life of the world. The resurrection does not satisfy our human need for certainty. And really, when you think about it, certainty has no part in faith. If we were able to achieve certainty, we would have no need for faith. Faith, after all, is the act of trust in the midst of uncertainty.

Upon hearing the Gospel, perhaps we did not notice an invitation, but the invitation is there, embedded in the story itself. The young man at the tomb invites the women to do something in response to the empty tomb. "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."

The good news of the resurrection serves as an invitation to go, in faith and in trust, to Galilee; for it is there that we may see Jesus. That is all we need, a "double whammy." It's not only that we have the fear and confusion of the empty tomb, but the invitation to go to Galilee is in itself an invitation to enter into those places that are unknown and uncertain. We need only recall that Galilee was not located at the center of life in 1st century Palestine. Galilee was a district that lay at the periphery of political and social life. I have often thought that if we want to see Jesus, we would do better to go to lower Kalihi or Wai'anae than to look for him at the corner of Bishop and King or at the State Capitol. If Jesus is going to be found, he will be found among the least of the brothers and sisters. The Galilee to which we are invited to travel may also be the deepest, darkest corners of our own lives, those places where we human beings encounter those things that trouble us most, whether it be an addiction, or an unresolved conflict, or a disease that cannot be cured but only healed, or the reality of death itself. In truth, the resurrection is not an answer, but an invitation to go, in faith and in trust, to those places we would rather not be, for it is there that God will be present, bringing forth new life.

How true to the entire Gospel story that the risen Jesus could not remain in Jerusalem but would have to return to Galilee, to the periphery,

where the story began. You will recall that it was from Nazareth of Galilee that Jesus came to John to be baptized. To come from Nazareth was the same as coming from “Nowheresville.” Then, after the baptism and the forty days in the wilderness, and after John the Baptist was arrested, “Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

After the resurrection, we are sent right back to the beginning, to Galilee and the good news that the time has been fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near. There can be no ending to the story, no final answer. The ending of the story, such as it is, is but a beginning, an invitation to journey forth in trust and in faith, for Christ has been raised from the dead!

And so it is that the resurrection is an invitation to leave our desire for answers behind and place our faith and trust in God’s leading. That is not easy or simple to do. We have a hard enough time simply living with the questions. To enter into the Galilees of our world, those places on the edge of life, those places of uncertainty, those places we would prefer to avoid, will need extra courage, to be sure, and no small amount of faith. And yet, this is precisely the invitation.

A week from now, we as a congregation, as part of the program known as Family Promise, will welcome the first houseless families to be with us here at Church of the Crossroads for just one week. We look forward to receiving these families into our midst. I hope, however, that this will be just a beginning for us and that the presence of these families here at the church, will embolden us to travel further into the Galilees of our world, as it were, so that we might be led to engage in new and bolder acts of faithful witness. We will go in faith, not knowing what to expect. The only assurance we have is that when we encounter the risen Jesus in the places of struggle and uncertainty in the life of the world and in our own lives as well, we will know what is required.

Let us not worry about what is in store for us. Let us not fear the future. Let us only say “yes” to the invitation, to go in faith and in trust, to Galilee, along those paths God sets before us. For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Now, once again, it is your turn. *Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*