

## Easter Sunday: "From Fear to Hope"

MARK 18:1-8

CHARLIE BERTHOUD | SERMON FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 4, 2021

Happy Easter! Christ is risen!  
Christ is risen indeed!

Easter is a day of celebration for us, but that first Easter was a time of isolation, uncertainty, and fear.

There were no flowers, or trumpets, or candy at the tomb 2000 years ago.

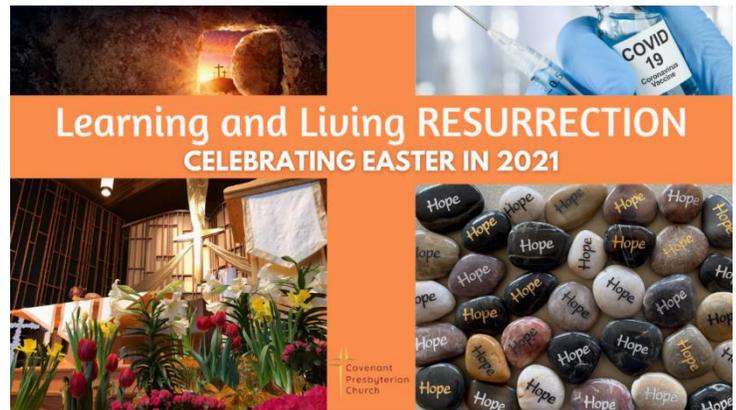
Jesus was dead. He had been killed as an enemy of the state.

He came announcing the Kingdom of God, saying he had good news for the poor and outcasts and the forgotten. He called people to live in new ways, to love neighbors and even enemies, to turn from hypocrisy and greed and selfishness, to care for the lost and the least and the last, to live with a new sense of purpose.

Because of what he said and did, Jesus was a threat to the established political, economic, and religious order—and as a result, he was put to death.

As the authorities closed in, most of Jesus' followers got scared and ran away. Just a few of them were there when he died on the cross, and three of them went to visit the tomb where he had been laid. They went with spices for burial; they were not expecting anything other than a dead body.

As you may know, we have four gospels in our Christian Bible. In Matthew, Luke, and John, we read about the resurrected Jesus. He



meets with the disciples, teaching them, eating with them, offering them peace, and encouraging them. Lots of positivity and lots of good energy. A good ending to the gospel.

Mark's gospel, our gospel for today, is different.

There is no resurrected Jesus. The gospel ends with these confused and scared women leaving the tomb. The last word in most English Bibles is "afraid."

Perhaps the intent is to invite us to be present at the empty tomb,  
to be there with the isolation, uncertainty, and fear,  
and to step into the story.

Listen for God's word—the very last words of the gospel according to Mark:

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.

Thanks be to God for the words of scripture.

The women at the tomb felt isolation, uncertainty, and fear. Just as we

have over this past terrible year.

For most of us, this has been the worst year of our lives. Covid has taken the lives of too many people, while causing economic and political chaos.

In addition to the devastation of Covid:

- We face the tragic reality of racism, as we've seen again this week with images of George Floyd's death and attacks on Asian Americans
- We are in the midst of environmental chaos, with melting icecaps, raging wildfires, more hurricanes and tornadoes than usual and extreme temperatures—all of which leave us wondering about the future of our planet.
- We are divided as we've ever been—politically, socially and economically—with too many people being led astray by rumors and outright lies, with the gap growing between rich and poor, making it very hard to work for the common good.

Making all of these things harder has been our isolation from each other.

Because of Covid, we have had to keep our distance from most people. We miss our loved ones. We miss handshakes and hugs and talking about the weather or sports. We miss sharing a cup of coffee, going to restaurants and movies. We miss being together in church!

We've done the best that we could—with masks, and distancing, and technology—staying in touch with each other. I'm grateful for all the creative and persistent ways we've found to stay connected as we can. And now finally—slowly and carefully—we can start reconnecting in person. We're moving from fear to hope—just like our gospel reading for today.

Most of the disciples had scattered and these remaining women were

weary and afraid. They go to anoint the body, unsure of what would happen after that.

But at the tomb, the stone is rolled back and a young man in a white robe is there, inviting them to not be alarmed and to consider the possibility that the story wasn't over yet.

This angelic figure essentially tells them: "Despite how bad things look now, don't be afraid. Jesus is not here. He will be with you, just as he promised, in Galilee—where you live and work and spend your days. He will be there. Go find the other disciples and tell them the good news."

As you may know, the gospel according to Mark emphasizes the phrase "good news." The first words of the gospel are:

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.  
(Mark 1.1, NRSV)

The gospel concludes with the bad news of Jesus' death, but that's not the end of the story. The angel basically tells the women that the story doesn't end with suffering, isolation, and death. There is more. There is always more.

Presbyterian author Frederick Buechner says it well: "The worst isn't the last thing about the world. It's the next to the last thing. The last thing is the best."

In a time of fear, Easter is a message of hope. In a time of despair, Easter is Good News. In a time of isolation, Easter is a call to get together and continue on the journey.

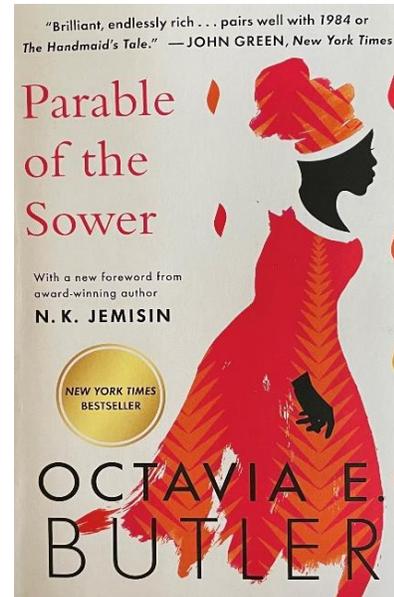
In a very different context, Winston Churchill expressed a similar sentiment, famously saying, "If you're going through hell keep going."

The good news of Easter is that God isn't done with us, and God isn't done with the world. We need to remember that after crucifixion, resurrection comes. New life slowly and steadily emerges.

It's as if the author of Mark is reaching out and saying to the reader, "Hey you, Jesus is alive, bringing new life to the world. Even if things are really bad right now, the story isn't over. Stick together and keep moving."

Fortunately, the women and the early church stuck together and kept going.

*The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler is a sci-fi novel, written almost thirty years ago, in 1993. The story focuses on a teenage girl living in California, in the 2020s, after environmental destruction and corporate greed have resulted in chaos across the USA. It's on many pandemic reading lists.



This is a dark and disturbing novel, definitely not for the faint of heart, and yet through the chaos, there is a sense of hope.

I don't want to give away the story, but I can say this young woman faces horrors most of us could only imagine, and yet she has a vision of a better world, a sense of hope. She embarks on a journey, and along the way, she meets other pilgrims, and they journey together.

It's not a simplistic fairy tale where everyone lives happily ever after, but it is an affirmation of the gospel message to keep moving away from fear, toward hope.

When things are hard—in a pandemic, or in a family crisis, or in the doctor's office or wherever—we need to look at the women at the tomb and the early church.

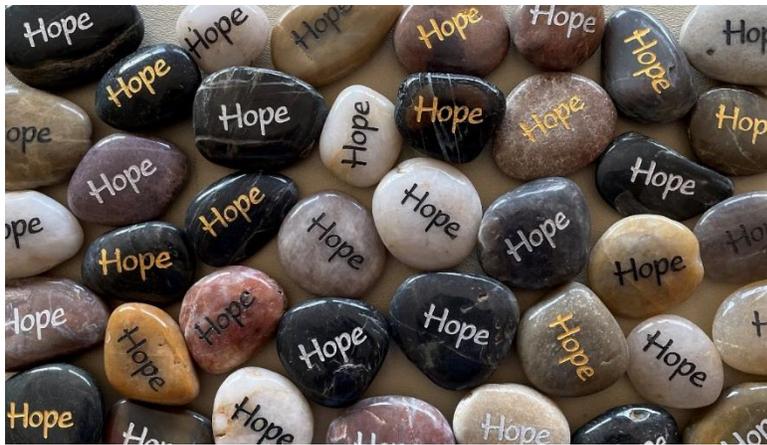
Stick together and keep going, and trust that things will get better. This is the journey of faith, the journey of Easter.

I'm glad to be part of a church where we talk regularly about the

journey of faith, and where we're open to the future. I'm glad to be part of a church whose newsletter is called "The Caravan," which reminds us to keep moving and stick together.

I'm glad to be part of the church where we encourage each other with hope.

We shared little Easter boxes with members and friends this year, and in those boxes was a little stone with the word HOPE on it. If you didn't get a hope stone, contact the church office.



I've been carrying mine around this week, and many times a day I hold it like a prayer bead, and it helps me remember that God is with us and that we have reason to hope.

Maybe that stone is just what you need, to remind

you that God's love is strong enough to roll away tombstones and to forgive sin and bring new life to the world.

Maybe that stone is just what you need to remember that the worst thing is never the last thing.

Maybe that stone is what you need to know that God is with you always. Or maybe there is someone in your life who needs a reminder of hope, and you can share your stone with them.

We have some extra hope stones in the church, which we'd be glad to share.

On that first Easter, the women went to Jesus' tomb with uncertainty and isolation and fear.

The stone was rolled away and the angel spoke to them, and this experience gave them what we need:

Hope that things will get better.

Hope that we're never alone.

Hope that the worst thing is not the last thing.

Hope to live as new people, and hope to share with the world.

Thanks be to God. Happy Easter. Amen.