



“Breaking Silence”

Easter Sunday

Mark 16:1-8

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*Filled with a mixture of holy amazement and deadly fear, the women who discover the empty tomb flee into the world, carrying astonishing story of Jesus’ resurrection.*

As you may have already heard, Woodlawn Chapel will be resuming in person worship on a regular basis beginning on Sunday, April 25. Now, as you might imagine, some things will have changed – our attendance will be limited, there will be some social distancing requirements and we will continue wearing face masks.

But I thought I’d run over a couple of other changes. Since we have all become accustomed to worshipping at home, please remember that this room is called a sanctuary, and not a living room, so there will not be any recliners available. Nor will we provide beds for those who have become accustomed to worshipping in bed. Also, while we don’t have a dress code for Sunday mornings, pink footy pajamas might not be the best option. However, we are looking into the possibility of providing plush spa-like Woodlawn Chapel monogrammed robes for a small charge. Cup holders will available only to those who have earned elite status on our frequent attender program.

Things may just be a bit different in our post-pandemic world.

In this Easter world, it is time for followers of Christ to break our silence.

Last April, Indian novelist Arundhati Roy observed how the pandemic was impacting her homeland. She noted how the economic impact on capitalism, but then observed the tremendous hardships lockdown imposed upon the poorest of the poor migrant workers of India, driving millions of the poor and hungry, the elderly and ill into the streets in an attempt to return to their home villages. It felt, she writes as though they were going home to slow starvation.

In a now famous article in the Financial Times, Roy comes to this conclusion:

Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to “normality”, trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. ... Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

Nothing will be normal. I believe that was on the mind of the women who encountered the empty tomb on Easter morning. If the dead do not stay dead, then nothing will ever be normal again. Alarmed and afraid, the women run from the tomb – racing not only away from the empty space where they expected to find Jesus, or even from the angel they encountered, but racing away from resurrection.

Did you notice that something is missing from this story? Each gospel writer puts a different slant on the resurrection, though only Mark leaves out someone pretty important -- Jesus.

He's all over in the other gospels. John shows Jesus consoling a weeping Mary, while Matthew offers a vignette of the two earthquake-shaken Mary's being surprised by him. While Jesus has fled the tomb in Luke, he does show up on the road to Emmaus and then breaks into the disciples' fear-filled conclave back in Jerusalem.

But Mark's abrupt ending to his gospel is different. There's fear, consolation, and a commandment to get moving. But Jesus is nowhere to be found. He's gone ahead to Galilee, and the fearful yet amazed women are told that's where they will see him.

This may surprise us -- you wouldn't have Easter Sunday without a preacher. No church would celebrate the resurrection without festive hymns and maybe even crowded pews. Don't forget the peeps and jellybeans either. But Easter without Jesus?

Mark's strange ending to this gospel is not normal. It leaves us suspended in midair. The camera fades to black, the look of terror and amazement on the women's faces captured forever as we begin to imagine – what happens now?

In the final scene of the series finale of HBO's "The Sopranos" began in 2007, New Jersey mafioso and family man Tony Soprano arrives early at a diner for a family dinner. Journey's "Don't Stop Believin'" comes on a jukebox, and Tony takes his seat as he waits for the family to gather.

Never one to be patient, Tony restlessly watches as customers enter the restaurant, always looking for someone who might be looking for him. Eventually the family begins to arrive: first his wife, Carmela, then son A.J. Daughter Meadow parks her car outside as a plate of onion rings is dropped at their table. Underlying drama flows through the scene as a stranger enters the bathroom. Viewers are on edge, waiting for Meadow, and wondering if the mysterious bathroom visitor has been sent to shoot Tony. Then, as Meadow reaches for the door, the diner's kitchen counter bell rings. Tony looks up...and the camera cuts to black.

Fans were frustrated by this strange ending. Many thought their cable service had been interrupted. In a second, all of Tony Soprano's tough talk and bravado were silenced. It was completely unsatisfying as the show launched viewers into complete nothingness. We wondered, "What happens?"

Endings are not a trifling matter. When Mark ends his gospel abruptly, it seems as though nothing will be normal. It ends with Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome dropping the spices they have dutifully brought to Jesus' grave and running off into...no one knows where. Cut to black, roll credits.

Some generations later, someone added their own ending to Mark's Gospel. Scholars do not believe it was the work of Mark, as it seems to only be an attempt to end the embarrassment over this strange tale. We do not know what happened: did Mark run out of paper? Did his pencil break? Was he imprisoned, or was the final authentic ending lost?

There are no definitive answers – but a good guess might be to say perhaps this is the ending Mark intended. Rather than being a fragment, this ending takes us back to the heart of Jesus' mission. The angel tells the women, "He has been raised he is not here...he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him, just as he told you.

Galilee: the place where Jesus performed healings and miracles. Galilee: the focus of his mission to those yearning for the kingdom of God. Galilee: the place where he taught. The place where he ate and laughed. The place where he spoke of God's abundant and eternal life.

The women flee, not because they have seen a ghost, but because they have been entrusted with the Good News of the Gospel. One scholar reminds us that they flee not from the resurrection but from the tomb, where they could have easily been accused of stealing Jesus' body. They run with amazement at the hope of the resurrection and run with joy that they are the ones who have been sent to tell the story of Jesus, who was crucified, died, was buried and raised on the third day.

No, nothing will be normal anymore. Everything has changed. And that is our Good News. It is not men who lead us from the tomb, but women.

Instead of looking back at an empty graveyard, the women point us forward. They offer hope to those who feel as though they have been abandoned by God. They spread the Good News, breaking the silence of despair and struggle by repeated the words given to him: He is risen and is going ahead of you."

The women become models for how we are to behave on Easter. We are the ones who need to tell Easter stories. The church is given the work of spreading resurrection stories.

We tell stories of how Good News spreads out like ripples on a pond. This week, Mary Voth commented to me about the "rippling effect" that occurred all because Betty Thompson made a call to the St. Louis Diaper Bank and suddenly found herself in charge of distributing 8,500 diapers. (I am excited to announce they have all been distributed!) Mary shared with me how that ripple led to another person she knew donating dozens of hand crocheted baby blankets, and another person to buy a huge lot of pacifiers for Newborns in Need. And think of the continuing ripples: women and infants who have been in the most desperate of circumstances will receive thousands of diapers this week.

Think of the ripple effect that the church can have in challenging the structures of racism and hatred. But it can happen in small ways, too. Think of the ripple effect that the church—this church—can have by planting a small vegetable garden outside the windows of our Sunday school rooms, a raised bed, with all sorts of deer prevention methods.

Do you know how we plan to keep the deer out? We will send them to confirmation class, baptize them and if history is correct, we'll never see them again!

Think of the ripple of effect the resurrection has. The women ran from the tomb and broke their silence. They shared the good news. And now it is time for us to follow them.

Nothing will be normal...and that is just fine, because Jesus Christ is risen, he is risen indeed! Amen.