

Sermon Easter Sunday  
Colossians 3:1-4, Psalm 118, Mark 16:1-8  
David Teschner  
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Let me begin with a great quote by Peter Larson. He said, "The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked 'No Entrance' and left it through a door marked 'No Exit.'"

Having started there, let's look more closely at the gospel we just heard with its startling ending: "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."

This is the ending in the oldest known manuscripts of Mark's gospel. What's so surprising is that there are no resurrection appearances and no proclamation. Scholars are divided over whether Mark's gospel really ended this way or if a lengthier portion was actually somehow torn off and lost from the original. Endings with resurrection appearances have been added to Mark, and all the later gospel writers made sure they didn't make the same "mistake" as Mark. Matthew, Luke and John add various resurrection appearances.

Personally, I like Mark's curious ending, but what could explain it?

The same little party of women who come to the tomb early Sunday morning are last heard of on Friday evening. Mark told us they saw where Joseph of Arimathea placed the dead body of Jesus in a tomb cut from the rock. Because it was late in the afternoon and the Sabbath would begin soon at sunset, the women couldn't carry out the customary burial requirements. They would have to wait until first thing Sunday morning.

Anointing a body after death with spices served a couple of purposes. The spices themselves kept the body from smelling as it decomposed. And the act of anointing allowed the mourners to honor the deceased and begin the grieving process.

It is obvious that the women were still reeling from the sudden turn of events that led to Jesus' cruel death, and they were fully expecting to find the cold, dead body of Jesus in the tomb. Even if Jesus told his followers that he would be killed and raised on the third day, evidence in all four gospels suggests that they didn't have any preparation for the events of Good Friday or Easter morning.

As the women approach the burial spot, they haven't thoroughly thought through their bitter morning task. "Who will roll away the stone for us...?" they ask themselves. Their first surprise

is that the grave has been opened, and then they find inside only a young man who tells them that the very Jesus they saw die on a cross is somehow alive again.

Mark tells us they are alarmed, and who wouldn't be? I'm surprised they didn't all just faint dead away, every last one of them. Instead they fled in a bit of hysteria with fear and amazement at what they had seen and been told, and they didn't tell anyone, at least not right away.

Even these ever so faithful women couldn't handle this latest turn of events. They had been exceptionally strong through Jesus' death, but an empty tomb was more than they could bear. This story is so true to how people would naturally respond.

Perhaps they didn't tell anyone because they didn't know what to say and what it meant. And if they did report a story of Jesus coming back to life without actually having seen him, others would have thought they were deranged.

I've had a few times when surprising circumstances sent me into a frenzy. There was the awful moment when I heard that my father had died in an automobile accident.

You may find it hard to believe, but when my son John was born, I panicked when I first saw him because he didn't look like he belonged to my family. I had no connection with or attraction to him until I held him for the first time, of course, and then my heart exploded with affection for him.

We all know these sorts of moments when we are not at all prepared for what is happening. The women's unsettling response to the news that Jesus is alive makes room for us to have a similar response to this fantastic story. We can doubt and question as well.

I'm convinced that Mark intentionally left his gospel with what some might call a gaping hole or an incomplete ending because he wants each of us to have our own experiences of the risen Christ as we go about our lives in Galilee or Petersburg or Chesterfield County. Our faith can't be solely built on the testimony of books written thousands of years ago. Many of us are like the disciple Thomas, who has to see Jesus for himself to believe.

If Jesus is alive, then we should see some evidence. This may not be a direct sighting although some have had visions. It may be a life-altering set of circumstances or even something we thought to be negative initially.

A woman named Doris was confined to a wheelchair. At first she described it as her cross, but later she saw it as her resurrection because she said without it, she couldn't get around and participate in life.

My two brothers and I inherited our mother's house on the coast of Maine recently. It is a very special place where we spent our childhood summers and always vacationed there as adults. My older brother wanted to buy my younger brother and me out, but offered a price that was too low. After weeks of emails and phone calls, we were still at an insurmountable impasse with no hope of resolution except to put the house on the market. It was very painful, as you can imagine.

Just as we were deciding which realtor to choose, my older brother unexpectedly upped his offer just a bit, and my younger brother unexpectedly dropped his previously high asking price. We had a deal. Since it happened on April 1, my older brother thought we might have been playing an April fool's joke on him. I assured him it wasn't April fools; it was an Easter miracle.

The world still abounds with Easter miracles because this is God's world. If you watch for them, or even if you don't, resurrection will surprise you sometimes when you least expect it. The message of Easter is that nothing can happen to us that God can't turn around for good in some way. After all, he entered life through a door with no entrance and left through a door with no exit. And he lives on. AMEN.