

St. John's UCC, Fredericksburg
April 8, 2012/Easter

**“A New Reality”
(Mark 16:1-8)**

We are now at the end of Mark's gospel, which is one of the intriguing things about this gospel. You will notice in the Bible there are two endings to Mark's gospel. As you can imagine this has caused a lot of discussion in biblical scholarship and some confusion for the readers of the gospel. Some scholars believe that the scroll of Mark's gospel became worn and frayed, which meant that the last lines were lost. There are some scholars who don't find any validity in the shorter ending. So you will notice that in our Bibles both are included in brackets. This could really be a whole sermon itself, but let us just look on what seems to be Mark's intended ending.

The one difference you will notice in this passage is that there is no resurrection appearance or a commission to preach the good news like we find in Matthew and Luke's gospel, but Mark seems to allude to them earlier in the gospel. In contrast, the ending of today's passage says that they went away from the tomb and said nothing to anyone because they were afraid! There is no joy in the morning...there is now shouting or proclamation! There is basically silence and leaving in fear. But as we look at this scene, we can understand their fear.

Mark tells us that early in the morning a small group of women went to the tomb prepared to dress the body of Christ with spices. This was an important ritual because in Judea and the surrounding areas a body begins to decay at the moment of death due to the high temperatures. We must be mindful that this was before the days of embalming and the other chemical processes that we use today. So there was a ritual to cover the body with sweet smelling spices. This is actually where we inherited the practice of bringing

flowers at the time of death. We often think they are used for their beauty, but this actually rose of this ancient practice so that there would be a sweet odor to overcome the terrible odor of death.

The women are coming to the tomb in sadness and grief with what happened three days ago. They come with their spices, which today we may be able to get at the dollar store. It didn't cost them much. But they came out of respect and attempt to slow down the process of decay. In many ways their response seems to not be the best response to the reality of death, but this is all they could think of doing. However, as they arrived to the tomb they found a new reality....Jesus is gone.....He is risen! Now we can understand their fear and astonishment....this is not what they were expecting. The story of the women at the tomb connects with our own responses to death and the good news of God's love that is demonstrated in the resurrection.

In preparation for this Easter message, I also struggled this week with my own grief because my brother would have turned 39 this past Wednesday. I am mindful of the fact that in the midst of our grief people try to offer their help or words of encouragement at this difficult time. But some times those gestures or words are not encouraging...not always helpful. It often makes our grief harder, but I realize at times that is all people know to do. It is hard for all of us to face death, but we also know that it is inevitable. In the midst of our pain and grief, it is hard for us to hear of the new reality.....the resurrection of the dead through Christ. The church's responsibility is to help people proclaim the good news that Christ is Risen! To face the new reality that Christ is alive now and forever!

We need to help people have an experience like a five-year old boy who as making his first transcontinental railroad trip. When the train rapidly sped into a tunnel and darkness surrounded the coach, the young boy gasped in fear. The train quickly cleared the tunnel and there was daylight again. Instantly, the relieved young boy exclaimed, “It is tomorrow today!” This is the essence of Easter! This is the message we are to proclaim. We need to tell stories about resurrection....about a new reality!

When the women went into the tomb, they found a young man dressed in a white robe. He informed them of the resurrection and then told them to tell the disciples and Peter that Christ is going ahead of them to Galilee. All Mark tells us is that they went away and said nothing. This ending to the gospel is puzzling for us and really leaves us hanging. It is just like the final episode that doesn't resolve the plot. Again, this could be another sermon or even study.

I think Mark is waiting for our response to this new reality. What will we do now that we have heard the good news that Christ is Risen? We are used to the fairy tale stories that have a nice ending wrapped with a bow. But Mark leaves us hanging so that we can complete the gospel. I am sure the women found the words to use in proclaiming the good news of Christ's resurrection. As disciples of Christ at this time, we must continue the story and share with others about the new reality that God's final word is life and not death! Let us leave this place today not in silence, but in joy to share the good news of the resurrection. Let us offer this new reality to others who need to receive the hope and assurance that only God can offer us. Let us accept this new reality and make it a part of our daily lives. Now go forth to share the good news....Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!