

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Scott Kenefake, Interim Senior Pastor**  
**“Resurrection – and the Second Half of Life”**  
**Mark 16:1-8**  
**Resurrection of the Lord**  
**April 1, 2018**

**Prayer for Illumination**

Living God, by your Holy Spirit,  
 open our eyes to see the new light of this day;  
 open our lips to tell of the empty tomb;  
 open our hearts to believe the good news;  
 through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

*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 (Mark 16:1-8).*

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This morning, I'd like to begin by sharing with you a short essay written by the award-winning writer, Rachel Held Evans. It's titled, *Easter Doubt*:

*It will bother you off and on, like a rock in your shoe,  
 Or it will startle you, like the first crash of thunder in a summer storm,  
 Or it will lodge itself beneath your skin like a splinter,  
 Or it will show up again—the uninvited guest whose heavy footsteps you'd recognize anywhere, appearing at your front door with a suitcase in hand at the worst. possible. time.  
 Or it will pull you farther out to sea like rip tide,  
 Or hold your head under as you drown—  
 Triggered by an image, a question, something the pastor said, something that doesn't add up, the unlikelihood of it all, the too-good-to-be-trueness of it, the way the lady in the thick perfume behind you sings “Up from the grave he arose!” with more confidence in the single line of a song than you've managed to muster in the past two years.  
 And you'll be sitting there in the dress you pulled out from the back of your closet, swallowing down the bread and wine, not believing a word of it.  
 Not. A. Word.  
 So, you'll fumble through those back-pocket prayers— “help me in my unbelief!”—while everyone around you moves on to verse two, verse three, verse four without you.  
 You will feel their eyes on you, and you will recognize the concern behind their cheery greetings: “We haven't seen you here in a while! So good to have you back.”  
 And you will know they are thinking exactly what you used to think about Easter Sunday Christians:  
 Nominal.  
 Lukewarm.  
 Indifferent.  
 But you won't know how to explain that there is nothing nominal or lukewarm or indifferent about standing in this hurricane of questions every day and staring each one down until you've mustered all the bravery and fortitude and trust it takes to whisper just one of them out loud on the car ride home:  
 “What if we made this up because we're afraid of death?”*

*And you won't know how to explain why, in that moment when the whisper rose out of your mouth like Jesus from the grave, you felt more alive and awake and resurrected than you have in ages because at least it was out, at least it was said, at least it wasn't buried in your chest anymore, clawing for freedom.*

*And, if you're lucky, someone in the car will recognize the bravery of the act. If you're lucky, there will be a moment of holy silence before someone wonders out loud if such a question might put a damper on Easter brunch.*

*But if you're not—if the question gets answered too quickly or if the silence goes on too long—please know you are not alone.*

*There are other people singing words to hymns they're not sure they believe today, other people digging out dresses from the backs of their closets today, other people ruining Easter brunch today, other people just showing up today.*

*And sometimes, just showing up - burial spices in hand - is all it takes to witness a miracle.<sup>1</sup>*

I think this essay describes where a lot of people are on Easter—if we're honest with ourselves—and that is perfectly OK. We've all been there at different points in our lives.

I want you think about this in terms of our Gospel reading this morning.

You see, Mark's Gospel centers on *the women's witness*. Three women come to the tomb. Perhaps, against the social mores of the time, these women traveled with Jesus, supporting his ministry and perhaps ministering to women in their patriarchal culture.

The death of Jesus *devastated* them. Yet, though their world had collapsed, they like countless mourners before and after them came to give their beloved friend and teacher one last act of love, to anoint and embalm his lifeless body.

They feel *powerless* as they look toward a future without him. They don't even know if they can give this one last act of love, as they ask one another, "*Who will roll away the stone for us?*"

But, to their astonishment, the stone has been rolled away; the tomb, and the angelic messenger reminds them of Jesus' prophetic words and challenges them to live boldly, letting go of death and claiming resurrection life.

*Stunned*, they don't know what to do next. Resurrection needs to *sink in* before they can tell Jesus's male disciples.<sup>2</sup>

Doubt, bewilderment, confusion. How should we understand this story?

Doug Ottati (addressing the nature of the resurrection stories) put it this way: "... *extended dogmatic discussions of this question almost always miss **the forest for the trees**. They do not come to terms with the larger implication of the fact that seemingly contradictory portraits of the risen Lord in his appearances could stand side by side in the New Testament. Why should the early communities have been comfortable with this? The answer, I suspect, is that they were considerably less concerned about the physical or non-physical nature of the resurrection "event" than are many of our contemporaries. For the early Christian communities, this was not where the main significance of the statement, 'He is risen!' lay. The primary importance of that confession was the reality of Jesus Christ as risen Lord of their **continuing experience**.*"<sup>3</sup>

Continuing experience—this, I think, is where we need to focus our attention at Easter; including our doubts, our hopes, fears, questions, bewilderment, religious and spiritual baggage, and confusion—in other words, our full humanity.

John Shelby Spong, speaking for most biblical scholars, said this of the continuing experience of Easter:

*"There is a **powerful Easter experience** that starts the whole Christian faith, transforms the disciples, changes them from cowards who had forsaken him and fled and brought them back into being heroic followers of this Jesus and that changed the way they understood God.*

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, Nelson Books, Nashville, 2015, pp. 186-188

<sup>2</sup> Bruce Epperly, *The Adventurous Lectionary*, Patheos.com, March 23, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Douglas F. Ottati, *Jesus Christ and Christian Vision*, Westminster/John Knox, Louisville, KY, 1996, p. 94

*So, whatever that Easter experience was they could never again think of God without seeing Jesus as a part of that definition. They could never again see Jesus without feeling that God was part of the divine definition. Something incredibly powerful happened.”<sup>4</sup>*

And this transformative, surprising *Easter experience* continues to happen to doubtful, questioning people—in a variety of ways—in our world today.

For example, Richard Rohr, Franciscan Priest, author of numerous books on Christian Spirituality, and the Executive Director of the Center on Action and Contemplation, describes this transformative *Easter experience* as entering the *second half of life*. (Note that the “second half of life” refers to the common pattern of human spiritual development, not chronological age). Rohr said:

*The transition to the second half of life moves you from either/or thinking to both/and thinking: the ability to increasingly live with **paradox and mystery**. You no longer think in terms of win/lose, but win/win. It is a very different mind and strategy for life. For this alternative consciousness to become your primary way of thinking, you usually must experience something that forces either/or thinking to fall apart. Perhaps you hate homosexuality and then you meet a wonderful gay couple. Or you meet a Muslim who is more loving than most of your Christian friends. Or you encounter a young immigrant who doesn't match your stereotypes at all. Something must break your addiction to yourself and your opinions.*

*Your first reaction is a struggle: “What do I do now? I don't like this. I can't deal with this. I want to go back to my familiar and habitual world.” You know your lesbian daughter is good and you love her and don't want to reject her. So, you ask your minister, “What will I do?” (Hopefully you have a wise, nondual minister!) Inside such “liminal space” is where real change happens, where your self-serving little dualisms must fall apart. It might be called growing up.*

*Jesus always honored and often idealized good, holy non-Jews, like the Samaritan man (Luke 10:29-37), the Roman centurion (Matthew 8:5-13), and the Syro-Phoenician woman (Mark 7:24-30). But even his disciples struggled to accept that the outsider could or should be accepted. If you're stuck in the first half of life, with your explanation about why you or your group are the best, you will hold on strongly because it's all you have, and any change feels like dying.*

*Often the only thing that can break down your natural egocentricity is discovering that the qualities you hate in others are within you. You're not so moral after all. You've imagined doing “bad” things; and if you could get away with it, you know you'd do it. Perhaps the only reason you don't is because you're afraid. Fear is not enlightenment. Fear is not the new transformed state of the risen Christ that we've been promised. Fear keeps you inside of a false order and will not allow any reordering.*

*Unless you somehow “weep” over your own phoniness, hypocrisy, fear, and wounded-ness, you probably won't let go of the first half of life. If you don't allow this needed disappointment to well up within you, if you surround yourself with your orthodoxies and your certitudes and your belief that you're the best, frankly, you will stay in the first half of life forever. Many religious people never allow themselves to fall, while many “sinners” fall and rise again. Our greatest sin is not falling or failing, but refusing to rise and trust ourselves—and God—again. Make sure you are always in need of mercy and you will never stop growing.<sup>5</sup>*

Friends, the Easter experience, resurrection, becoming fully human, or entering the second half of life—whatever we call it—is a **deep mystery** and the best way to understand the Easter stories, I'm convinced, is as *parable*—*parables about Jesus*. That is, *metaphorically*. Parable and metaphor are about *meaning*.

Doug Ottati (quoting Reinhold Niebuhr) picks up on this truth by suggesting that religious language, rightly understood, is like poetry:

*“Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit. It is better therefore to be satisfied with the **symbolic presentation** of the poetry in hymn, anthem, and liturgy. The sermons which interpret these stories usually make a rational defense of their historic validity or they qualify them rationally to make them acceptable to the intellect ... I suppose it is necessary and inevitable that the poetry of religion should be expressed in rational terms but something is always lost in the rationalization.”<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> David M. Felten & Jeff Proctor-Murphy, *Living the Questions*, Harper One, NY, NY, 2012, p. 119, (quoting John Shelby Spong)

<sup>5</sup> Richard Rohr, *Falling into Mercy*, cac.org, March 27, 2018

<sup>6</sup> Douglas F. Ottati, *Jesus Christ and the Christian Vision*, Westminster/John Knox Pres, Louisville, KY, 1989, p.

The story of the empty tomb as parable—as poetry-- means that death could not hold Jesus, could not stop what he had begun. The powers killed him, sealed him in a tomb. But that was not the end—he continued to be known, and known as Lord.

The stories of his appearances make the same metaphorical point: when Jesus appears to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24, he is experienced as a stranger who travels with them, and then is recognized as Jesus in “*the breaking of the bread.*” In John 20, he appears to (doubting) Thomas, who needed, yearned, hungered *for his own experience of the risen Jesus*, and blesses those who have *not* had such an experience and yet believe.<sup>7</sup> And that’s still true today!

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<sup>7</sup> Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, Harper One, New York, 2011, pp, 112, 113