

Mark 16:1-20

Most of us have heard the story of Easter before. Of course, the main purpose of Easter is not just a day where we might enjoy coloured eggs, chocolate, and the Easter bunny. Easter is a celebration of Jesus Christ rising to life after dying on a cross. The idea of a person being raised to life three days after a horrible death is amazing in itself. Yet, still more amazing is that the one who died had no sin. He was the perfect Son of God whose mission was to show us how God reigns, through his life, death, and resurrection.

Today's passage from the gospel of Mark is unique among the four different writers. Mark has a shorter ending and a longer ending. Most scholars agree that the shortest version, ending at verse eight, is true to Mark. But there are scholars who believe the rest may have been added by someone else, who wanted to "help" Mark have a more hopeful ending. I believe either ending could be possible. By possibly leaving out the appearance of Jesus, Mark may have wanted to emphasise the empty tomb and challenge us to decide for ourselves if we really believe that Jesus rose. It draws us into the story...

If we include the longer ending, it's interesting how it talks about divine power, and protection from deadly things, like snakes. What really caught my attention, though, is the repetition of the theme of believing. First, when the women come to the empty tomb and are told that Jesus is raised to life, they run off in terror. Then, after Mary Magdalene meets Jesus, she later tells the disciples, but they don't believe her. Then, Jesus appears to two of the disciples. When, later on, they tell the rest of the disciples, they don't believe either. Finally, in verse 14, Jesus appears to the rest of the disciples and rebukes them for their "lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen." How often have we been stubborn in our own ways, or lacked faith in God, and then become fearful rather than trusting? We're bombarded everyday with doom and gloom announcements in the news. It takes faith to see how God continues to reign even in the middle of a pandemic, or the middle of a war, or during a climate crisis.

Today, we celebrate Christ's resurrection. This gives us hope, knowing that death is not the end. And, we see that the Almighty God continues to reign... How would you describe the gospel (the good news)? Many might say that the gospel message is, "Jesus died on the cross, taking the punishment for our sins." But, that view really says nothing about the resurrection. The Apostle Paul put a lot of importance on the resurrection. In 1st Corinthians 15, Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain." If the gospel is only "Jesus died for our sins," Jesus' life, is also then left out. It's like what is emphasised in the Apostle's Creed, Jesus "...was born of the virgin Mary (comma), suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified..." Jesus' life and teaching ministry becomes a comma between his birth and death. The Apostle's Creed was written to emphasise some points about Jesus that were important to emphasise at the time it was written. The creed is a good starting point, but it's doesn't cover everything. It fits with what some people possibly feel when they say that "Jesus came to die." But, there's much more in the Bible that we can't ignore. The gospel/good news is much more than just that Jesus died for us. In his life, death, and resurrection we see the good news that God reigns.

For the rest of this message I'd like to look more deeply at Jesus' mission, which was to show us the reign of God. God's ways are different from the violent ways of this world. How did Jesus himself talk about the gospel? Mark chapter one, starting in verse 14 describes how Jesus began his ministry, "...Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.'" Notice that Jesus wasn't asking people to "believe that I died on the cross for your sin." It was a different message! In Jesus, the kingdom of God had come near to people on Earth. Jesus was the long-awaited Saviour, the One who would confirm that God is truly with us, that God loves us, and that God has a mission to free us from the bondage of sin. Jesus taught and lived his mission right from the beginning. He was speaking

for God, not for himself. His whole emphasis was not, “Look at me.” It was, “Look at God.” He invited people to follow him and look to God as he looked to God. His stories were about God’s kingdom or the kingdom of heaven. These were just other ways to talk about God’s reign, meaning God’s work in the world. Jesus was sharing the good news that God was already at work in the world, and that God is present in Jesus.

What is your image of God? How does he reign? Some see him as a strict judge who will send the “good” people to heaven, and the “bad” people to a violent hell. But, the Bible talks much more in terms of sin being the natural outcome of choices which ignore God’s ways, rather than something bad that God puts on us. Here’s a short explanation of how we could understand it.

“Sin is just plain ugly, through and through. It breaks the heart of God, and it ruins the lives of people. If you fail to repent of the sin in your life, it will ultimately destroy you. And it's not so much a question of God "punishing" you for your sins - sin brings about its own punishment. When a parent tells a child not to touch a hot stove, and the child disobeys and does it anyway, what happens? The child gets burned. Who burned the child? An angry, vindictive parent? No, the hot stove burned the child. The loving parent tried to encourage the child not to touch the stove in the first place. This is why we need to repent, to live in sin is to bring great harm upon ourselves.

Although some of our troubles are not the result of our own sins, the fact is that most of them are.

Jesus teaches a very different image of God than an angry judge. God is like a father welcoming his wayward son home with open arms, no questions asked, even though the son had totally disrespected the father by demanding his inheritance money early and squandering it on partying and prostitutes.

Looking at the meaning of the cross, I’ve struggled with the image of a God who requires violence, the death of Jesus, in order to save people from sin. That’s why it was so refreshing to learn that there are non-violent ways to understand of what happened. J. Denny Weaver in his book, “The Non-violent Atonement” explains how Jesus’ mission was shown throughout his entire life. He lived being faithful to God. He taught and showed us God’s ways of love and non-violence. “Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.” When the guards come to arrest him, Jesus says, “Have you come out with swords and clubs as if I were a bandit?” They did not understand who Jesus was and that he represented a God whose ways were non-violent. Peter draws his sword and cuts off the ear of one of the people, in an effort to defend Jesus. But, Jesus scolds him, telling him to put the sword away. He then heals the person. During his trial, Pilate asks Jesus if he is the King of the Jews. Jesus says, “My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews...” Even from the cross, Jesus cries out, “Father, forgive them for they don’t know what they are doing.” God’s kingdom is one of truth, and sacrificial love, not one of violence and coercion. Jesus was showing us God’s ways as he submitted to being tortured and hung on a cross. Weaver writes, “Refusing to return evil for evil unmasks the violence of the evil acts, and demonstrates that the evil which killed Jesus originated with humankind and not with God.”

I’ve heard it described in this way. Humanity has been shaped by evil, and trapped in evil systems. We are all affected by this. “Salvation is to begin to be free from these evil forces, and to be transformed by the reign of God and to take on a life shaped...by the story of Jesus whose mission was to make visible the reign of God in our history.” Jesus was killed by these structures that are influenced by evil. The cross was the result of forces that oppose the reign of God (rather than the result of God’s purpose)! The cross revealed the difference between God’s reign of love and rule of evil. With the resurrection we see that God is more powerful than the worst evil that can happen. As we celebrate Jesus’ resurrection, we celebrate God’s future breaking into the present, giving us hope and courage to change things for the better. The resurrection motivates us to work together with God.

Before the resurrection, suffering and death seemed to be outside of God's reign. But, because Jesus went through suffering, he forever changed the perspective. Now, suffering and pain are no longer distant from God's reign. We gain strength from knowing that God has also suffered, through his Son. God knows our pain and weeps with us. Yet, we know that God's reign goes through and beyond any suffering and even beyond death.

Through Jesus, we experience God's presence and forgiveness, but without repentance, it's hard to accept forgiveness. God says, "You're forgiven!" But, if I think I didn't do anything wrong, God's forgiveness doesn't help me. Repentance means leaving the reign of our old life, and accepting the new reign and direction of Christ. We have only two choices. Either we choose to join God's reign, or we remain in bondage to sin. Once we choose to accept God's forgiveness and join God's reign it becomes a life-long process. It's a change of direction that may result in suffering, loss of income, or even loss of life. But, it's a way of life filled with the fruits of the spirit, such as joy, hope, and love. We join God's reign in resisting evil and making God's reign visible to others. Jesus said "Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." (Mtt.5:16) It's all about our God, whose reign is even stronger than death. Let's pray.

Almighty God, you reign over all the earth. We praise you for your great power and love. Thank-you for showing us who you are through the life, death, and resurrection of your Son, Jesus. Thank-you that even in the worst suffering and death that could happen, you are present. Grant us courage to daily turn from our old ways and join in your reign of love and peace, through Jesus Christ, our Lord, Amen.