***Shiloh United Methodist Church***

Mark 15:42-16:8 Rev. Tyler Amundson April 12, 2020

***The Story Isn’t Over Yet***

Mark 15:42-16:8 Common English Bible (CEB)

**42**Since it was late in the afternoon on Preparation Day, just before the Sabbath, **43**Joseph from Arimathea dared to approach Pilate and ask for Jesus’ body. (Joseph was a prominent council member who also eagerly anticipated the coming of God’s kingdom.) **44**Pilate wondered if Jesus was already dead. He called the centurion and asked him whether Jesus had already died. **45**When he learned from the centurion that Jesus was dead, Pilate gave the dead body to Joseph. **46**He bought a linen cloth, took Jesus down from the cross, wrapped him in the cloth, and laid him in a tomb that had been carved out of rock. He rolled a stone against the entrance to the tomb. **47**Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses saw where he was buried.

**16**When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus’ dead body. **2**Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they came to the tomb. **3**They were saying to each other, “Who’s going to roll the stone away from the entrance for us?” **4**When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away. (And it was a very large stone!) **5**Going into the tomb, they saw a young man in a white robe seated on the right side; and they were startled.**6**But he said to them, “Don’t be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn’t here. Look, here’s the place where they laid him. **7**Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you.” **8**Overcome with terror and dread, they fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Where were you a month ago?

No really, take a minute and imagine for yourself where you were one month ago. Today is April 12, so on March 12 or 13 where were you? What were you doing?

What did shopping look like?

What did work look like?

What did school look like?

What did church look like?

What did life look like?

Life looked very different a month ago. A month ago today I sat in a meeting with the leadership in my church and we discussed take extra precautions in our worship around COVID-19. Less handling of objects, gloves for communion. To be honest, a month ago I wasn’t sure whether to call the disease we are trying to avoid spreading COVID-19, Coronavirus, and quite honestly I never imagined it would change our Easter in this way.

A month ago, I was also in another challenge of my life. It had been 1 year since my mother had died, and I was trying to find ways to grieve her. I was seeking ways to remember her memory, thank God for all she had offered me in my life, and to remember the night I lost her.

Then within that month I had to face another reality of grief, life changing so dramatically that it would impact the way in which we serve the people of the church. I never thought I would have to grieve not being with the community I serve on Easter Sunday. I never thought I would have to grieve my kids not being able to be in school, to see their friends, and to learn from their teachers. I never thought I would have to grieve the loss of freedom from the fear of catching a disease, that is dangerous to a majority of the congregation I serve.

The other thing that has changed from one month ago is that I have seen people in their grief act out the worst parts of themselves, and I have also seen people in this grief act out as the best people God could have placed on our Earth. I have seen people act out and do some things that I would never have imagined a month ago. And I have seen people care for others in ways they would not have done a month ago.

A lot has changed in just one month.

For many of the people I have worked with in the church, an Easter Sunday like this one, with empty sanctuaries is their worst nightmare.

Take a minute and look at our sanctuaries and how they sit today.

First UMC

Places that used to be full of people sit unused.

Hope UMC

Places that used to be filled with music are silent.

Grace UMC

Places that offered a place of refuge are locked.

Evangelical

Places that offered resources to people cannot.

Shiloh

Places that offered Peace to people have been forced to find another way.

The story of the disciples we heard today from the gospel of Mark finds them in a place where, like us, nothing will ever be the same. This passage was chosen today for a reason. If you have studied Mark you will quickly learn that the ending the Bible was added at some later date. Verses 9-20 in the Mark’s chapter 16 were additions. The earliest manuscripts we have of Mark’s gospel end with verse 8. “Overcome with terror and dread, they fled the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

Not exactly the Easter celebration I grew up with. Bells ringing in cathedrals, trumpets blasting in the sanctuary and from balconies, choirs filled to brim with “Great Getting Up Morning” cheer, and churches mass producing activities to engage people in faith and fun in the season.

Yet, the earliest gospel leaves us with this, “Overcome with terror and dread, they fled the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.”

Those early morning disciples had heard the good news, right? In the additions to Mark there is rebuke for the disciples, even the risen Jesus supposedly gets on their case for not being more sure of what had happened.

Would we have been so jubilant and sure though?

I am not so sure we would have been. We as a Americans tend to let our culture infuse Easter with a little bit of the notion of, “Quick let’s get through Holy week, I am not sure how comfortable I am with the notion of Christ suffering and death. I know I can feel good on Easter morning.”

One of my favorite authors, Kate Bowler, who studies what is know as the American Prosperity Gospel. The Prosperity Gospel is the notion that if you find Jesus you will gain the American dream of wealth and prosperity. Speaks of a time when she was in Houston on Good Friday, the Friday just before Easter, the day when we recognize that Jesus was crucified, killed and died on the cross. She decided to see if any of the Prosperity Churches had a good Friday service, because Kate who was and still is living with stage 4 cancer, needed to be with Jesus as he suffered to trust Jesus suffers with us to.

She found 1 Good Friday service in all of Houston, at Joel Olsteen’s church. If you don't know this prosperity preacher he is in the old Houston Rocket’s stadium, that is his church. She said it was an odd experience showing up for Good Friday to a parking lot guide saying, “Happy Good Friday.” Strange on such a somber occasion to get off the escalator to, “HAPPY GOOD FRIDAY!” She says to give them credit, Jesus did die and stay dead for the first two songs. But for some reason, in our American need for pleasure and satisfaction, they had resurrected Jesus by the 3rd song, even on Good Friday.

It will be a year ago this week that we watched on the news as the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris burning. It was an interesting moment for the world. For many of us we watched it burn and it reminded us that Christianity was decaying, not reaching a new generation of people with hope and love. Yet we had this picture of the cross still standing on the altar, not a scientific feat for the fire would have had to been a forge to melt the cross, but in a sense a reminder that there is something more important about our faith. The story of Jesus itself.

A year later there is still some debate about how to rebuild the cathedral. The cathedral itself took 57 years to build from 1163-1220. Later in its history a spire was added. This is what burned with the roof last year, the same spire that was taken down once before because of decay and the one completed in 1859 was being repaired when the fire happened last year.

The question is to add the spire back or to make the cathedral more modern.

This sounds to me just like many of the conversations I have had in church meetings. What color floor, who the guy I know we can hire, should us “an” or “a” in that paragraph of our mission statement.

Friends, while we may be in grief like the disciples the danger of our grief after we return from this time away due to COVID-19, is that we will debate which spire to rebuild, or the perfect mission statement, or the color of the carpeting we need.

Is that really the question we as Christians should be asking? Should we really move so quickly beyond the death of what was, it to ruscitation what was.

Or like the disciples should we be people of resurrection?

When most preachers ask a question like that, I think they are challenging their churches to be jubilant, excited and bold. I want to stop for a minute and encourage us not to start from this place.

The time for us to be bold in our faith will come soon enough, the world is changing rapidly and even more so with this most recent reality change.

Instead I want us to be true people of the resurrection and be ok being afraid and be ok not telling everyone that we think it is going to be alright. Instead let’s be like the first account of the gospel and the first disciples who were unsure about their future, and took the time they needed to understand what this young man shared in the scripture today, “Don’t be alarmed! You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He isn’t here. Look, here’s the place where they laid him. **7**Go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that he is going ahead of you into Galilee. You will see him there, just as he told you.”

This gospel, Mark’s gospel, wasn’t written down until around the year 70, it took 40 years for people to be sure enough about this gospel to put it in writing. It took 57 years to build a cathedral. I am not suggesting we withdraw for a lifetime into this moment, but let’s take this month we have to withdraw and ponder. “Lord what do you want me to do through us in this time and place?”

Over the past few weeks I have been pondering this very question, for myself, for my family and for the church that I serve alongside here in Billings.

What do I do with the reality and news that as Methodists have worked together over the past few weeks our online presence has connected nearly 1,000 people each week to our online worship the new way we have been doing it?

When we go back to the church buildings do we continue to offer this online worship for those who are connecting to us in new ways to find Christ?

What do I do with the knowledge that in some ways my church has connected more deeply with members through calls, cards, and service to one another in the last two weeks, than I have seen in the last two years?

When we go back to our building will we continue to be a body of Christ in the ways we have newly discovered?

It was about 100 years ago that Methodist Christians faced another pandemic. In 1918 the Spanish Flu ravaged the world. Causing more death than I hope we will face in our time.

Methodists in that day had their own reaction to the pandemic. One pastor in Baltimore was upset about the Government shutting down churches and said this in a letter to the editor,

"Does it look like good judgment, in the face of a disease that is spreading death and terror among a people almost equivalent to that of the great war...to close an institution that was designed by Jesus Christ to bring comfort and help in the time of sorrow and need...while we allow an institution of the devil...to run wide open and thus add to the misery and suffering of many of our helpless people?“

- Pastor, Methodist Episcopal Church Letter to Editor, *The Sun*, October 15, 1918

Of course he was referring the fact that in Baltimore they shut down churches, but not the bars. We have done better as a society this time around. Churches and bars are closed.

In Houston, one trusted clinician during the outbreak realized his small clinic would not house all the sick. So, he trusted the Methodists with his clinic because he knew they could raise the funds necessary to build a proper hospital for the city.[[1]](#footnote-1) They did and it is one of the hospitals helping in Houston at this very time.

In Billings, we Methodist Deaconesses, women who devoted their life to the service of God, started what is now Billings Clinic. Many of whom would have helped in 1918 during the Spanish Flu when First United Methodist Church was turned into a hospital to help house and care for all of the sick.

We have a history of learning how to serve God in the moments we are faced with. How will we discover the new normal, the new way to serve Christ, so that people 100 years from now will know God in their lives when they need hope during the next pandemic? Will you take time this Easter and risk withdrawing in the knowledge of Easter to help us pastors, church leaders, and people of God discover what God is calling us to do next.

Or will we demand the Easter we have always known, when we return to our churches?

One last thought. Many of you know this picture:

(Beatles – Abbey Road in London)

Late in March this happened. (Pic)

I know it may not look the stupendous rebuild of Notre Dame, but Abbey Road is site made famous by the Beatles and many of us know it. However, normally there is so much traffic, foot and vehicle, that no one gets to paint this iconic crosswalk.

What if we took this time to consider what the resurrection means to us? What Jesus means to us? What if we didn’t try and come back together and add the exact same spires to our cathedrals when we returned? Or go back to the same pew? Or go back to arguing about missions statements and carpet?

What if we took this time to dwell in the resurrection in fear, and trembling? And when we emerged, be willing to build the hope that generations of people from now will look back on and say, do you remember the Methodists in Billings? Those were resurrection people.

Those are the people that let God tear the curtain between what church was and allowed it to become hope for the generations. They were afraid and unsure, but they let God change them. Just like the disciples in the gospel of Mark.

1. <https://abc13.com/5498950/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)