

St. Paul's Congregational Church
April 1, 2018, Easter Sunday
Mark 16:1-8: Now What
The Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Welcome to you all! If you're a visitor, family of a member of the congregation here for the day, someone who is here every week, or if you're someone who hasn't been here for a while –welcome - we're glad you're here. I'd like to tell you that what you see here is a typical Sunday, an ordinary Sunday, as we gather in worship. But you all know that's not true – it certainly isn't a typical Sunday – it's Easter! We have all these beautiful flowers given in memory of or in honor of special people in our lives. We have additional voices with us in the choir contributing to our worship, the whole family, except for the youngest members, is gathered.

This is hardly an ordinary Sunday: today we celebrate something so awesome there are no words to truly describe it: Jesus, crucified, dead and buried for three days, coming forth from the tomb early on Easter morning – what could be more extraordinary!

The gospel of Mark ends with the word afraid – it's Easter Sunday but this gospel sounds more like Good Friday or Holy Saturday. Where's the joy? The resurrection story? We know Christ has risen – but the three women don't know what's going on and they're afraid – when the angel in white greets them and tells them Jesus is not there.

In the darkness on the third day after their rabbi's execution, three women check one last time to make sure they have

everything they need to give Jesus a proper Jewish burial. Followers of Jesus in his lifetime, they want to be faithful to their teacher in death – he'd been placed in a donated tomb, he'd been robbed of a proper Jewish burial because his death came right on the verge of the Sabbath. These women intend to make this one thing right in a universe turned hopelessly away from God. The Twelve are hiding in a locked room with other disciples for fear they will be found out as followers of Jesus. But, these women prepare to be at the tomb as dawn breaks.

They arrive at the tomb and find a seemingly insurmountable obstacle between them and their sad task of a proper burial for Jesus. The women know they don't have the strength to budge the great stone blocking the entrance to the tomb. As they walk to the garden, they wonder, "Who will roll the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?"

Mark tells us that the women then looked up. The original Greek word, though, can also mean the women looked again. The women come upon the tomb and as they expected, the stone is rolled in front of the entrance. They don't stand a chance of getting near Jesus on their own. Then they look again, maybe do a double take, and realize that the stone has been rolled away.

Mark has already prepared us for this need to do a double take. Twice in Mark's Gospel, Jesus has healed blind men and allowed them to see again. The word used to describe the two blind men seeing again is the same one used here, to look again. Already in those stories of healing the blind, there was a sense in which spiritual healing allowed the men to see again with physical sight.

In Mark's Gospel, faith gives us the ability to see the world as God sees it. When we look with the eyes of the world, we see the obstacles and problems. The stone blocks our path and it is too large for us to even budge. We look with the eyes of faith and a different picture comes into focus. God has already removed the

obstacles that we could not remove by our own power. Jesus tells us to look again, to look again with the eyes of faith!

This is so clear in this version of the Easter story. The three women are blocked by an obstacle, which they stood no chance of removing on their own. They ask one another, “Who will roll away the stone?” Yet, when they look again through the eyes of faith, they see that the stone has already been rolled away. The stone that blocks their way is already long gone when they do the Easter double take and see the world as God sees it.

What are the stones that need to be rolled away in your life? Is the obstacle one of relationships that can't be made right? Or is your path blocked by an addiction to alcohol, drugs, or some other destructive cycle from which you don't have the power to break free? What are the stones that need to be rolled away from our community life here at St. Paul's? What's the obstacle for us?

All of us, individuals and as church, can find our way blocked by obstacles too big to budge. The story of Easter tells us that God offers the ultimate leverage to remove the obstacles in your way, in our way – look again!

If we rely on our own might, our own abilities, our own wisdom, the stone in our way will be more than we can face. Period. But, when we have the courage to admit we don't have the power to remove the obstacle, we can turn the problem over to God. Then with the eyes of faith, we may come in time to see that the insurmountable obstacle has already been rolled away.

But, that's not the end of the Gospel reading. The Bible is, if nothing else, the most realistic of books, and today's reading is no exception. The women enter the tomb to find an angel telling the news that Jesus has been raised from the dead and has gone ahead of his disciples to Galilee. It would be wonderful to report that the women were immediately filled with joy.

But instead, we are told that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome fled from the tomb seized by terror and stricken with awe. Rather than spreading the joy of resurrection, we are told, “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

It is there that the reading ends. Mark’s Gospel offers the challenge of a circular story. The Gospel begins with Jesus in Galilee challenging people to come and follow him; at the close of the story, Jesus has once more gone ahead into Galilee holding out the offer of discipleship to any who will come and follow him.

What about you? What about us? Would you, would we, have the courage to leave the empty tomb and go back to Galilee to take up the task of being Jesus’ disciple now that we know the way of discipleship led to the cross and the grave? These women and each of us all have learned the cost of discipleship. There is a cost, isn’t there – then and now.

The Gospel offers a dual challenge this Easter. The first is to look at the very real obstacles in our lives with the eyes of faith – because the things that we are powerless to change are not obstacles to God. Through grace, we can see that God has already removed the problems plaguing us, if we have the faith to push ahead.

But the second part of the challenge of the Gospel comes when you push ahead. Just as the women found the stone rolled away only to be struck dumb with terror and awe at the news of Jesus’ resurrection, we too can lose our focus and stop seeing the world as God sees it. The second challenge then is the harder one. Once we have seen that God can remove the obstacles blocking our way, then we must follow where Jesus leads.

The three women that morning did break free from their fear. We know that they were all active in the earliest Christian church.

They found the courage to follow Jesus even after they had learned the cost they might have to one day pay for their faith in him.

Jesus will remove the obstacles from your path, from our path together, if we will stop trying to remove them by our own might. Then we will be given the grace to continue the journey. The path is open to each of us. Jesus is still out there beckoning, “Follow me” to those who listen. We only need respond by faith and say yes to the invitation.

In this resurrection story, we are invited to stop looking in the tomb, the place of death, and turn toward Galilee and meet him among the living. We are invited to turn away from our fear and seek out the light and love of the living presence of God in our midst. Let’s follow that path together.

For Alleluia! Christ is risen.

Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia!