

May 14, 2006
Pastor Wendy
Christ is Risen, Alleluia
Mark 16:1-8

Easter is the high point of the Christian year. It's a time of joyful celebration--the celebration of Christ's victory over death and the new life that brings to us. The new life of Easter comes at the same time as the new life of spring, so nature itself joins the celebration, with spring flowers blooming and the whole earth waking up again. Today, with our Bach cantata we join our voices and rejoice in the new life that Christ has brought us.

This is a joyful season in the Christian calendar, and yet, as the center of Christian faith, the resurrection also produces emotions other than joy—for some, ambivalence, skepticism, anger, or indifference. The lives we live, our experiences, our memories, our disappointments, our hopes—all of these color our emotions about Easter.

As I look around and see all your faces, I wonder what has brought you here, and what you bring with you. Some, likely, are visiting friends or family. Some are here to hear the Bach Cantata. Some are here for the Law Enforcement Memorial Celebrations. Or maybe you have fallen out of the habit of church-going altogether, but still, at Easter time you look for a church. Maybe you do this in honor or remembrance of parents who brought you to church, or with nostalgia for a childhood faith you don't feel any more. Some of you are here because you are here almost every Sunday, but for you, too, this day is different and maybe not altogether comfortable. You got here and found someone sitting in your seat. Some of you might be wondering, how long is the pastor going to preach today?

For everyone who might be squirming in the pews today, for whatever reason, be at ease—we are here to sing the good news of the gospel this morning.

But our note of celebration is haunted by the dark side—the Good Friday linked to Easter. Luther and Bach recognized that you couldn't get to Easter without Good Friday, so that is where we began this morning. Singing about the death on the cross—death that is necessary for resurrection. Singing of the scandal of Christ crucified—not just a savior who died, but one who was tortured and executed. There's just no way to make that into an upbeat message.

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Luther and Bach took their cue from the evangelist Mark. Mark doesn't try to explain what can't be explained. He doesn't try to gloss over the horribleness of the crucifixion. Instead, he takes us right into the scene of that first Easter morning.

Three women come to the tomb with spices, to anoint the body of Jesus. They are the faithful remnant—women who stood at the foot of the cross while all the disciples had fled. Now, they come to care for Jesus' defiled body—disgraced by crucifixion.

On the way, they're worrying about how they'll get to the body—who will roll away the stone at the entrance.

When they get there, the stone has been moved, but the body is gone. Inside the tomb, they meet a young man in a white robe, a figure who is never identified. He tells them the good news—Jesus has been raised from the dead. He tells them to bring the message to the disciples, "He is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Now it is their turn to flee. "Terror and amazement had seized them," Mark tells us.

And that's the end of it. No resurrection appearance. No running to tell the story. No meeting in Galilee or on the road to Emmaus.

Only this: "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

It leaves us hanging. We're stopped short, left in the terror and amazement of that first encounter with the empty tomb.

It's an ending that has disturbed Christians for centuries, so much so that other writers supplied new endings. You can find those in many Bibles—endings that revise the women's silence, and have them telling the story; endings where Jesus appears in person to confirm the resurrection. Or, you can avoid Mark and his abrupt ending, and go to the story of Easter morning as it is told by Matthew, Luke, and John.

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But Mark leaves us with the empty tomb, and silence. Luther, Bach and others before them and after them picked up where Mark left off. They put their hands to pen and paper; they put their fingers to keys and strings. They lifted their voices and made beautiful music and added to Mark's story.

This morning with the Cantata choir, we lift our voices to add another chapter to the Good News story still being written, sung and lived.

Christ is Risen Alleluia, Alleluia.