
Time to leave the tomb
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
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Based on Mark 16:1-8

Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! How wonderful it is to say those words. Those cherished words of hope. Those comforting words of faith. Since the days of the early church, Easter has been the most important and most celebrated event of the church year. In fact, Easter was the most popular Christian holiday even before the invention of the Easter bunnies and chocolate eggs, if you can imagine that. Well, of course Easter is important to Christians. Who could imagine otherwise? The resurrection of Jesus is the event that led to the creation of the Christian Church, right? Well - yes and no. But mainly, no.

When we read the Easter texts as we have just done - the stories of the resurrection of Jesus - they don't seem particularly - powerful. They don't seem like words that could launch a new religion. For example, we just read some text from Mark - those words are in fact the original ending of the gospel of Mark. And yet, it's hard to see the text as anything particularly inspirational or motivational. In summary, the women disciples come to the tomb wondering how to deal with the stone that sealed the tomb. They speak with a "young man" who tells them that Jesus has risen, and the women run away in fear. Does that sound like the type of inviting, inspirational text you could use to build a new community of believers? Let alone a new world-beating religion?

When we read those words today, we read them through a lens that is 2000 years thick. That lens includes interpretations by the "Church fathers". And important religious events including the inquisitions, the crusades, and the reformation. That lens includes social transformations including the evolution of democratic society, the colonization of North America, modernization, globalization, the rise of rampant capitalism, and our experiments into the information age. It is easy to feel removed from the words in our text. And in particular, it is easy to forget that those words - when they were first spoken - described a time of great fear and uncertainty. For us, the words are comforting and affirming. For the disciples, 2000 years ago, these stories probably caused the hair on the

back of their necks to stand up.

The resurrection texts - for all their mystery and wonder - contain feelings of great uncertainty and fear. There were very few witnesses to the resurrection, and the witnesses who were present were not believed anyway. Remind me again - why is Easter so popular?

I think there are at least 2 answers to that. One answer is that the Easter narrative was crafted by the early Church to be theologically important. The event of resurrection as described in scripture was perhaps unimpressive. But the theological meaning that the Church injected into the resurrection story gave the Church something concrete that they could build on. In plain terms, in the early days of Christianity, the meaning of the resurrection was much more important than the event itself. The meaning of resurrection is what the church grabbed ahold of and is what allowed them to expand into a global reality. And of course, given the dominance of Christianity during the time of Christendom, many other symbols became associated with Easter. Like bunnies and chocolate and eggs. Thanks be to God for that!

But the other reason that Easter is important is because of what happened after the resurrection event. At the crucifixion, Jesus died. But after the resurrection, Jesus kept appearing to people in various forms. As written, first to the women, then to some of Jesus's closest friends, then to all of the disciples, and then to other people. And that whole trend continued right up to the Ascension, and then Pentecost, at which time the spirit of Jesus touched everybody. Understood that way, Easter is not the big event theologically and spiritually. The big event was that after Easter, the spirit of Christ was felt and experienced by many many people. That is what enabled - and still enables - the church to find meaning. It is the abiding feeling of the spirit of Christ that allows the Christian faith to have meaning today. The spirit of love. The spirit of acceptance. The spirit of inclusion. The spirit of peace.

So Easter is not the end of the story after all. In fact, Mark sets the stage for this understanding right from the onset. In Mark chapter 1, verse 1, Mark introduces his gospel with these words, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." But there is nowhere that Mark ever writes, "and now, here is the end of the story".

Mark's final words are the beginning of another story - a story that continues today. I realize that we have been on a journey called "Lent", and I realize that the journey has been leading us to Easter. And I'm sorry if you feel that I misled you. But I did. Easter Sunday is not the end of the journey. In fact, if Easter Sunday was the end of the journey, we might wonder what the point of the journey was.

If you don't believe me, please join with me in a simple thought experiment. Imagine - if you will - being present for the original Easter Sunday. Imagine being sealed in the tomb with Jesus. Feel the damp, the cold, the dark. You shiver. Then you hear strange noises and you slowly come to realize that the stone blocking the entrance to the tomb is being rolled away. You blink in the dim but blinding light. You smell fresh air. And in the dim light you look around the tomb and you realize that Jesus is not dead. You say, "Hey Jesus, you're not dead! Let's go find the disciples. They are probably at Tim Hortons right now. Let's go meet them. I'll buy!" Now, imagine Jesus saying, "you know, I think I'm just going to sleep in. Last time I walked around Jerusalem it didn't turn out too well. I don't want to be attacked and crucified again. I think I'll just stay in the tomb where it's safe. I've been resurrected, and that should be good enough. Haven't I worked hard enough already. My resurrection proves God's power whether or not I leave the tomb. There is nothing more for me to do anyway. You go and have a good time. And please bring me back a Canadian Maple and a small double double"

Imagine that. Imagine if Jesus had stayed in the tomb ... if the resurrected Jesus had stayed in the tomb. I don't think the Christian enterprise would have gotten off the ground - in spite of the resurrection. The critical point about the resurrection was that it was not the end of the story. Jesus had to leave the tomb. Jesus's spirit had to touch lives. The spirit of Jesus has to keep touching lives. Christian faith is not defined by our past. It is defined in our present, a present where Jesus keeps touching lives. Resurrection was not enough. Jesus had to come out of the tomb.

And notice that when the resurrected Jesus came out of the tomb, things did not go back to "normal" for Jesus or the disciples. Jesus and his followers did not go back to the "good old days". The physical body of Jesus entered the tomb, and the spirit of Christ left the tomb. And then, that spirit spent time with the disciples and then ascended.

Leaving the disciples to take the Jesus community on a new path, in a new direction. The resurrection was not about bringing new life to Jesus's corpse. The resurrection was about bringing new life to the disciples. And today, the resurrection is not just about what happened to the physical body of Jesus 2000 years ago. The resurrection is about us - the disciples - the body of Christ today. Resurrection is about us finding new life today. And that will only happen if we ourselves are prepared to leave the tomb.

This sermon would have been just about right if we were now seeing the end of the tomb that we call COVID. It would be so great to shift the conversation. To compare leaving the tomb with leaving the pandemic. We could easily have talked about leaving the tomb of the pandemic behind to find new life in our church and in our community. But given that we are now in a provincial shutdown, that message doesn't quite work the way I hoped it might.

But I stand behind this message anyway. Because it is still time to leave the tomb. Wait - I hear you say - we don't know how to do that. Sure. But do you think Jesus's disciples knew what to do 2000 years ago? No. They just remembered what was important. And they got to work.

The first step in leaving any tomb is to recognize the tomb you are currently in. And I mean this on an individual level as well as on a congregational level. Certainly, on a congregational level, we have been through a lot over the past few years. Even long before you ever heard of COVID - or Rev. Paul for that matter. Are we still living in a tomb from our past that is robbing us of new relationships through lack of trust or lack of understanding or lack of respect? Perhaps now is the time to leave those tombs behind and to discover new life.

I sense this is not really news to you. This has been a work-in-progress here already. In many ways we have been coming out of our tombs over the years. Whatever else you might say about Sydenham-Heritage, we are a resilient bunch! And a caring bunch.

One tomb we have emerged from is whatever has driven us to see ourselves as a progressive Christian community. An inclusive community. Our profile committee recently sent out surveys with many questions, including a question of what it means to

be a progressive Christian community. And I want to offer my own incomplete answer to that, because it relates to coming out of the tomb.

What exactly is progressive Christianity? There are a number of dimensions to that. But one dimension is to take our faith so seriously that we care enough to challenge theological ideas that don't work for us any more. To challenge traditional theologies if we find them too lacking in justice, or too narrow-minded. I am not going to say that those theologies are wrong - because many members here still find value in them. But there is still a difference between a theology that helps us find our own healing, and theologies that do not. Progressive Christianity says that it's worth the effort to figure out the difference.

In that context, progressive Christianity is about being liberated from theologies and ideologies that are barriers to finding new life. Progressive Christianity is an invitation to leave the tomb of outdated ideas and to embrace new life. Many people over the years have told me that a particular idea that came from Progressive Christianity felt to them like resurrection. And I know that you've had many discussion groups and book groups around Progressive Christianity here.

Well that's all great. But in my mind, that's only the first step. Your search committee specifically hired me to help push Progressive Christianity further. So you won't be surprised that I want to invite us to take another step.

Many of you have told me that you think of Progressive Christianity as being liberated from theologies and values that were not live-giving. That's an important step - being liberated from something. Another step is to imagine that we are not only liberated *from* something. But that we are also liberated *to* something. In blunt terms, now that we've been liberated, what are we doing to do with our freedom? Is it enough to sit around and congratulate ourselves for being so clever? Or do we have a vision to use our liberation to help our wider community in new and vital ways.

If we want to be a voice for inclusion in Brantford ... what exactly might that look like? We need to come out of the tomb and figure that out. I will have more to say about Progressive Christianity next week, because next week we celebrate the story of doubting Thomas. And doubt is a key element in faith.

But today - on Easter Sunday - each of us is invited to leave the tomb. To leave the quiet, security, and safety of a closed world and to enter into a loud, insecure and risky world ... the world of real life.

We are invited - not to go back to the “good old days”, but rather we are enticed to move forward, into “good new days”. We are invited into our future. What else would you expect new life look like? We are invited to continue the journey. Lent is over, but our journey continues.

It's time to leave the tomb.

Amen.