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Easter: Who gets resurrected?  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
April 20, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on on Mark 16:1-8 and Mark 16:9-20

Happy Easter! Easter. Traditionally a time of celebration for Christians. And anyone who likes chocolate. Traditionally a time for an egg hunt. Traditionally a time for a good meal with family and friends. Traditionally, a time for the minister to preach a boring, inoffensive, sermon in case we have visitors in church today. Some traditions have to change of course. And I'm not giving up chocolate! I guess I'll just have to give up being boring!

[image: my butt hurts]

Easter! A time to grapple with stories of resurrection and life that we may struggle to understand. Easter is a time of surprises. And of course, surprises do not only come in those chocolate eggs. In our gospel story today, one of the big surprises is the importance of women in the story.

After Jesus's arrest, the disciples seemed to scatter. And the men in particular just took off. In contrast, the women amongst the disciples seemed to hang in longer. In today's story it is only women who risk going to Jesus's tomb in order to prepare Jesus's body for burial.

[image: hot cross bunny]

Some scholars tell us that it would have been dangerous for the men to go to Jesus's tomb. Scholars tell us that the authorities would have been more suspicious of the men. They tell us that the men did not go because they had very legitimate fears of being arrested - or worse - themselves if they had gone to the tomb. That is possible of course. But I hope we all noticed there is no discussion in the gospels about the men even wanting to go! The women just went. The women among Jesus's disciples would have been good UCW members. They saw something that needed to be done. And they just did it.

[image: mona kurd]

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Then, when the women returned to find the disciples, it seems that the disciples did not believe them. Or I could say the men did not believe the women until they had more proof. Which means that the men did not believe the women.

The women were the first on the scene. And they were also the first to be removed from the story. When the apostle Paul described this same event in 1 Corinthians 15, he said, “remember that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [which was another name for Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me.”

[image: brothers in greek]

According to Paul then, the women were not at the tomb at all. And even the reference to “more than five hundred brothers and sisters” does not actually include women. I'm sorry to have to tell you that. Most biblical translators insert the English phrase “brothers and sisters” whenever Paul uses the Greek word for “brothers”. The simple truth is that the role of the women disappeared from the story.

So the men did not believe the testimony of the women. Is anyone here really surprised? Do not forget that in those days, and in that culture, women were not eligible to give testimony in Jewish court either. It is not actually hard to believe that when the women tried to share a story about a risen Jesus, nobody believed them. Moreover, I wonder if the women were even understood. They were describing what sounded impossible of course. Later writings removed the women from the story. But in the Gospel of Mark - which was the first gospel to be written down, the women are still front and centre at the tomb.

[image: two paths]

We just read the entire last chapter of the gospel of Mark, which describes what happened to Jesus and to the disciples after Jesus's crucifixion. For Mark, it is the end of the gospel. The end of the story. And I wonder if you noticed, but the chapter in fact contains two different endings. Our first reading this morning included the first ending.

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And the second reading was the second ending.

The first ending is very brief. The women come to find Jesus's body at the tomb. They meet an angel who tells them that Jesus has risen. And the women run away in fear to find the rest of the disciples.

The second ending continues from there. It focuses on the fact that the disciples did not believe the women and other witnesses who saw the risen Jesus. The second ending also includes what is sometimes called "The Great Commission". That is where Jesus tells the disciples to spread the Good News throughout the world and to baptize people everywhere. It is in fact, a call to create and to grow the church.

The first ending, which ends with the women running away in fear, is accepted by virtually all biblical scholars as the ending that Mark actually wrote. The second ending was written, not by Mark, but by the early church. The second ending is completely absent from the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament. And - as always - that is an invitation for us. An invitation - not to throw the second ending away. But an invitation to consider: what problem did the early church have with the original ending? "What is wrong with the original ending?" Or, perhaps more graciously, "What more did the early church think needed to be said?"

And if we think about what more needed to be said, we will need to consider what the word "resurrection" means. Those of us here who are high on chocolate eggs might immediately say that resurrection means Jesus's dead body returning to life. Well, of course that is one sense of the word, "resurrection". But the word resurrection has other meanings.

[image: a short digression]

People often speak about resurrecting things. If you go to google and search for "I resurrected my old ..." you will find an impressive list of old things that people say they have resurrected .... from old computer systems to old washing machines. From bicycles to web sites. From old cameras to ... well, you get the idea.

[image: old things used again: steam tractor]

Please understand, I am not imposing the word "resurrection" on to these items. People are using the word "resurrection" to describe their own experience. But in all

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those cases, resurrecting an old camera - for example - merely means that someone had a camera, which they used and loved. Then over time the camera was no longer used. Then the person rediscovered the camera and brought it back into use. That type of “resurrection” simply means that something old is used again. And it is used in just the way it was used before. It is not “better”. It is not “improved”. It is simply used “again”.  
[image: I used to drive steam tractors]

That type of resurrection can be fun. But it is really just backwards-looking. It is simply realizing that an old item like a camera still performs its original function. That type of resurrection might be interesting, and perhaps comforting, but it is backward looking.

In the same way, if the dead body of the crucified Jesus had simply sprung back to life for a few weeks. If things had simply returned to the “good-old-days” for Jesus and the disciples, that would have been backward looking too. Resurrection is not just reversing a crucifixion. Whatever we think happened on that day of resurrection, the strong reaction of the disciples suggests that something very dramatic happened that day. Perhaps something even more amazing than a dead body coming back to life.

[image: backwards vs forwards]

Because there is another way to think of resurrection - and that is looking forward. We often say that resurrection is about finding new life. And new life is always about our future.

The early church wrote a second ending to the Gospel of Mark because they thought that something more needed to be said. I believe that the first ending is backwards-looking, and the second ending is forwards-looking. The first ending ended with the women running away in fear. The second ending was about taking the faith out of the tomb and taking it to the streets.

The first ending is about the resurrection of Jesus’s body. The second ending is about resurrection and new life for the whole community. The second ending is important. The second ending is about the future. The second ending is about our future.

[image: you are invited]

Resurrection is an invitation. Not an invitation to go back to our old life.

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Resurrection is an invitation forward into a new life. The real issue at Easter is not whether or not Jesus's corpse was physically resurrected for a few weeks. The real issue is whether or not you and I can be resurrected into new life. Right here. Right now. Can we find new life today,

And that is our invitation for today.

What resurrection, what new life are we looking for today? And that question applies to us as individuals, and as a congregation. What resurrection do we ourselves need?

[image: throwing trash away]

We have been discussing this all thought Lent, actually. On an individual level. Which is why during Lent we have all been encouraged to find new life by giving up some of the baggage that weights us down. Including: our need for control, our expectations, our resentments, our being judgmental, and our feeling powerless. That is how we find new life individually. That is how we find our resurrection.

[image: body of christ]

And what about the resurrection of us as a congregation? As the body of Christ? Historians can argue if they like about what happened to Jesus's body 2000 years ago. But what I care about - and what I hope we all care about - is what happens to this body today - this congregation. This body of Christ. What resurrection are we open to ourselves? What resurrection do we need to have? What resurrection does our community need us to have? I really look forward to discussing this with you over coffee today and throughout the week.

[image: hymn lyrics]

And if we are looking for some hints, immediately after this reflection we will be singing together the hymn "Christ has no body now but yours". That hymns mentions opportunities like:

- Heal the wounded world
- See as Christ would see
- Journey with the poor

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- Give back to those in need

And many others. As we sing together I invite you to see which expressions resonate with you. We say that we are the body of Christ. But let us challenge each other to push beyond that metaphor into practical, doable, possible actions. The spirit of Jesus calls us to be the body of Christ. Do we want to accept that resurrection?

[image: holy week]

I really enjoy the drama of Holy Week. We start with cheering and singing on Palm Sunday. By Maundy Thursday, we have become a bit confused. Jesus does not seem to be taking his ministry where we expected it to go. He turns out to not be the Jewish messiah who will liberate us from Roman rule after all. By Good Friday, that confusion has turned into sadness, bitterness, anger, disbelief at the death of Jesus by crucifixion. Our world has been shaken. We doubt ourselves. Were we suckers? Were we following a delusion? And then as Easter morning dawns, we find resurrection. We find new life.

That emotional roller-coaster we call Holy Week likely reminds many of us about some parts of our own lives too. The cycle of joy, uncertainty, loss and grief, and new life is a familiar feature of the human condition. If you don't believe me, ask someone who has been through cancer treatments. Ask someone who has experienced deep loss. Ask someone who struggles with homelessness. Ask someone who struggles with mental health. Ask someone who struggles with addictions. Our need for resurrection is real. Our need for new life is real. My hope and prayer is that this community of faith becomes a place where each of us can help each other find that new life, together. My hope and prayer is that we embrace our own resurrection.

[image: arrival]

But even after all that, I have to say that I really like the first, original ending to the gospel of Mark. I love how raw and organic it is. I love the fact that the author had no problem ending the gospel without closure. It is simply beautiful. An angel tells the women that Jesus lives. But the angel does more than that. The angel tells the women to not fear. And the angel tells the women to go. The command is - in spite of fear - to go. To continue. To keep working for the healing of the world. To keep working to build and

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be the kingdom of God here and now. The original ending of Mark says that the continuing spirit of Jesus is enough. The continuing of the spirit of Jesus, the spirit that still impacts us after 2000 years is the only miracle we need. Beyond that, we just need each other.

And really, do we need more than that? It is enough. And when this worship service is over, I invite all of us to Go! Go and keep working for the transformation of the world. Resurrection is right outside our doors.

*Amen.*