

“A New World Coming”

Rev. David Gregory

April 1, 2018

Easter Sunday



Scripture reading

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.

As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

It was fourteen years ago that the United Church of Christ began what was envisioned as a re-branding campaign. Like most Protestant denominations, the UCC was seeing some pretty rapid declines in membership and influence, and the leadership began to realize that the 20th century model of Liberal Christian Theology wasn't going to be compelling enough to carry the message into the 21st century.

This was the birth of the comma. It started with a quote from Gracie Allen: “Never place a period where God has placed a comma.” In other words, *the story is still being written*. We became the church of the continuing testament, and to this day, many churches in our orbit feature some sort of comma logo along with the phrase “*God is still speaking.*”

This campaign now seems as outdated as email, but even an Instagrammer might now and then find something of value in an old way of doing things. There might still be some truth that could be mined from the comma before we dream up something else that is cuter and more cutting edge. For me, the truth of the matter is: *the story is still being written*.

It seems like there is no end to the evil being unleashed against the world, and especially against society's most vulnerable. There are daily assaults on the environment, on the judicial system, on anything that promotes the common good. It is self-interest over the common

interest. I read the other day that 82% of all wealth created in the world during the last year went to the top 1% of the world's population. If you want, I can continue spouting dismal statistics all morning long, but this would not serve us well as we try to speak of resurrection, new birth, new beginnings. And wallowing in the constantly negative news ignores the truth of the matter, which is that *our story is still being written*.

This Wednesday marks fifty years since Martin Luther King Jr. lost his life on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee. Five years earlier, he had stood at the National Mall in Washington to utter some of his most famous words:

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.
I have a dream...

Many of us would point to the fact that his dream has never been realized. Some would even say that his dream has died. The truth of the matter is, *the story is still being written*.

I have spent the week contemplating the brusque, succinct, and eminently unsatisfying rendition of the resurrection story from the gospel of Mark. In this story, you have traumatized women concerned about doing the women's work of caring for human remains and preparing them for burial. You have the prospect of a tomb that has been closed, and the impossible task of opening it once again. You see someone saying "he is not here," and the women running away in fear. And what is the point of the story?

I don't mean to rain on anyone's parade this morning, but it is important for us to realize that the four gospels are not four documents written by four guys named Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. They were collections of ideas transmitted orally over many decades, and in some cases, centuries before being written down. Since 1947 we have been made aware that there were more than four gospels, and as near as we can tell, the gospel of Mark did not originally contain a story of the resurrection at all, and its story ended with the burial. I realize it may sound cynical of me on a beautiful holiday morning to call the basics into question. If I promise not to mess with the Easter Bunny, will you at least hear me out?

At Stone Soup the other day, I asked the folks to read today's gospel and let me know where they felt it in their bodies. The consensus was that we didn't feel much of anything at all. It seemed irrelevant to debate the details of the story, to try to harmonize the various gospel accounts, when it is plain to see they contradict one another in ways that are irreconcilable. What is our point, then? For people in search of a contemplative experience of Easter, what can be found here that makes a difference to our lives on April 1, 2018? I think the point is that *the story is still being written*. At no point in time can we say unequivocally that this is the way it is, and this is the way it is going to be, and nothing is ever going to change.

What if I said to you this morning that there is a new world coming, that every valley is going to be exalted, and every mountain and hill will be made low? What if I were to say that beyond a shadow of a doubt there will be justice for every vulnerable soul on the face of the earth, that the hungry will be filled with good things? What if I told you that good will triumph over evil, and that the peacemakers will be truly blessed? What if I said that this dream was about to come true? Could you believe it? And more importantly, could you with gratitude open your arms to receive something you never thought was possible, and fully possess it even before it arrived? And what if all of this were as close to us as our own breath?

It was Arundhati Roy, the novelist from India, who said at the height of the Iraq war in her provocative book entitled *War Talk*:

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. Maybe many of us won't be here to greet her, but on a quiet day, if I listen very carefully, I can hear her breathing.

The fact is, *the story is still being written*, and we are at the brink of something. Like Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis, we are called to get up and move toward a destination we do not fully know. It is the movement itself that opens our hands, our hearts, our minds, and our doors to new possibilities, new vistas, new directions, new life.

Easter is all around us. It is among us. It is within us. Among the rites of springtime, it is the ancient story of brand new life that rises from the ashes, from the deadness of a seed husk in the moist ground, or from a tomb that is inexplicably empty. This morning, we look with expectation and hope for a new world rising from the one that is, one that first lives in us as sacred vision before germinating into new reality. And in our new life together here at the top of Rock Hill, we are finding that our best days are not behind us at all, but rather in front of us. Not only is the stone rolled away from the tomb, it was never there in the first place.

On this quiet day, let us hear her breathing – this energy, this soul, this spirit that is within us – and knowing that we are this close, let's just get up and go on. We might feel a little weary from the journey, but the fact is, we're almost there!

Alleluia!

