***AN EMPTY TOMB, AN UNFINISHED STORY***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

April 1, 2018

Texts: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 and Mark 16:1-8

 Today marks a first for me and for many of you as well, though you may not realize it. Today is the first time in my 60+ years of life that Easter is being celebrated on April 1st and thus coinciding with April Fool’s Day and Jim Morrison’s birthday. The last time Easter fell on April 1st was 1956 and before that 1945 and 1934 and 1923 and before that you have to go back into the 19th century – 1888 – long before most of you were born. It is an oddity of the Easter calendar that we have waited 62 years to celebrate the Resurrection on April Fool’s Day, but the Easter calendar is a little odd to begin with. Christmas is always celebrated on December 25th, but Easter Sunday has no such fixed date. One year it is in March and then maybe April or perhaps back in March again. Technically Easter is celebrated the first Sunday after the first full moon that appears on or after the March equinox; in practice that means we have no idea when Easter will be next year without consulting a calendar. The date moves around a lot; it can be any time between March 22 and April 25. The date for Easter is a bit of a puzzle year to year, but maybe that is appropriate, for the Resurrection and Gospel accounts are a bit puzzling as well; for many it seemed to be little more than another April Fool’s joke.

 There have been a host of those. On April 1, 1957 the BBC aired a documentary about a family in Italy who were collecting spaghetti from what they identified as a spaghetti tree and the BBC received numerous calls about whether that tree would grow in England. On April 1, 1996 Taco Bell proudly announced that it had purchased the Liberty Bell and would be renaming it the Taco Liberty Bell to the outrage of people in Philadelphia. And on April 1, 2012 an eyeglass manufacturer called Warby Barker advertised eyeglasses for dogs with a great picture of a basset hound wearing dark-rimmed glasses; hundreds of people called the number advertised, only to get a recording saying, “April Fool’s!”

 April Fool’s Day jokes are rooted in the unexpected and outrageous, so this convergence of days is perhaps appropriate, for resurrection is about as unexpected and outrageous as anything there is. In the 1st and 21st century alike the expectation is that those who die do not return to life. Some folks have near death experiences and are resuscitated, but those who go beyond near death to death do not come walking back into our lives. The grim reality of Good Friday was that Jesus was beyond near dead; in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, “he was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into Hell,” all of which is to say that Jesus was really dead – not mostly dead, not nearly dead, but dead dead, dead and gone dead, his death confirmed by a centurion who reported the death to Pilate, his body wrapped in a linen cloth and buried in a rock-hewn tomb by Joseph of Arimathea as Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joses looked on.

 That tomb is where the women and disciples expected it all to end. The tomb is where Pilate and the religious authorities who had urged Jesus’ crucifixion expected it all to end as well. It is where every one of us would expect it to end, because that is where the story of those who die comes to an end. And had it ended there as expected, we would not be here with alleluias on our lips and hope in our hearts. But here we are, two thousand years later singing our alleluias and hearing the story yet again with hope and faith and joy, which suggests that something happened there at the tomb that was more than an April Fool’s prank!

 Notably none of the Gospel accounts describe the Resurrection. Search the pages, check the footnotes, look in the fine print. It’s not there – there is no description of how it happened or when it happened or exactly what happened when the crucified, dead and buried Jesus was raised. All of the gospel writers record Jesus’ burial and then are silent about the events of that Sabbath day that fell between the burial and Easter’s dawn. The Sabbath began at sundown on the evening of Jesus’ crucifixion and ended with sundown on that Holy Saturday. Sometime in the night – sometime between sundown Saturday and sun up Sunday – Jesus was raised and left the tomb. The physics of it all remain a mystery. What we have is the account of women finding an empty tomb and then, in various versions, encounters with the risen Lord. Mark doesn’t even go that far!

 You heard it in the reading from Mark’s gospel this morning. The women arrive at the tomb by the light of day to anoint the body and find the stone rolled away. Inside the tomb they encounter a young man dressed in white, presumably an angelic figure of some sort, who tells them that Jesus has been raised and is not there. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee,” says the white clad lad. “There you will see him, just as he told you.” And so in response to this amazing experience the women do what? According to Mark they flee in terror and amazement and say nothing to anyone. And then as if his pen ran out of ink or a page was torn out, Mark’s story ends – ends with silence and awe and fleeing and “for...” In later centuries other writers will tell the rest of the story as they know it – fill in details about Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene and the disciples, affirm the disciples’ commission to spread the word – the “sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation” as one of those writers phrases it, which is about as un-Marcan language as you could imagine. And so Mark’s Gospel has three endings – one from the first century and two from later centuries. But the earliest and most authentic is the one we heard this morning, the one that ends with fear and fleeing and “for…”, leading biblical scholar Lamar Williamson to note: “When is an ending not an end? When a dead man rises from the tomb – and when a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence.”[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Perhaps that was Mark’s intention: to say that the ending is not the end, the story continues, and the tomb that was supposed to be the final chapter in Jesus’ story becomes the first chapter of a new story – a story of life and hope, a resurrection story that is still being written two thousand years later in the lives of you and me. Mark ends his Gospel, not with a period, but with “for…” and that leaves open possibilities for the future, opportunities for new chapters to be written and new stories to be told.

 What then is your contribution to that continuing story? Do you have a resurrection story of your own, an experience of God’s life-giving presence in the face of death? Do you believe that the tomb is empty and Jesus was raised from the dead as that angelic figure told the women? If not, then how does Jesus’ story end for you? If you believe he is risen then what difference does it make to you? Paul suggests that the difference is hope. When we stand face to face with death – our own death or the death of another, whether in a hospital room or at the site of another mass shooting or at the foot of a grave – we dare to hope in the power of God that is greater than death, a power who declares that death never has the last word in our stories or in the stories of those we love. Jesus’ resurrection offers to us hope as an alternative to despair – hope not only at the time of death but hope with which to live each and every day.

 This week the annual Gallup-Sharecare Well-Being Index was released. It is based on a survey of 160,000 adults in the U.S., asking about their sense of purpose, social relationships, financial security, health, and connectedness to their community. 2017 turned out to be the worst year on record for well-being. “Almost every demographic group dropped in well-being in 2017 – except wealthy white men...People are not content in their jobs and relationships, and depression diagnoses are at an all-time high in the United States,”[[2]](#endnote-2) according to the study. The Hebrew word for well-being is *shalom*, a word we generally translate *peace*. It seems that we are struggling to find peace and hope in our lives and in our relationships these days. Jesus says, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you.” Have we forgotten that promise which is rooted in God’s resurrection promises, that promise of peace, God’s assurance of God’s presence with us in life and in death?

 Jesus’ resurrection bears witness to those promises and offers to us confident courage as an alternative to anxious fear. It is courage and confidence I have seen in the eyes of many a patient at the end of life;

 confidence that God will still be with them after they have drawn their last breath;

 confidence that something wonderful awaits;

 confidence that God’s promises are true.

It is the confidence of my terminally ill mom saying “whether I live or die, it will be okay;”

 the confidence of Crystal Gosnell going to Nigeria to serve orphaned children despite the dangers all around her;

 the confidence of Jesus saying, “Into Thy hands I commend my Spirit.”

It is confidence born of faith in the risen Christ, confidence that God is greater than death and that all things are possible for God –even those things we cannot fully explain or fully comprehend, like resurrection. The good news of Easter is that we need not fear death, for it is no longer a great unknown. God knows it and has defeated it in Jesus’ resurrection!

 That is good news when death comes knocking at our door, but it is also good news with which to face the challenges of living day to day. Life is sometimes fragile and there are a host of voices out there warning you to be afraid of the present and the future, but the alleluias of this Easter day drown out those anxious voices with a joyful shout of “He is risen!” Because he lives, we also will live long after we have drawn our last breath. Because he lives we can live *now* with confident courage, persistent hope, and that peace for which so many Americans seem to be fruitlessly searching. If we find ourselves anxious these days, perhaps it is because we are more attuned to the angst of the world than to the angelic alleluias. Listen then to the voices of the angels and the women and Paul and the saints across the ages and the saints across your life who proclaim together this good news: “The tomb is empty! Jesus is risen! Because he lives, you too will live!” That is the story they tell, but the story doesn’t end there! The story continues – with you and with me. What chapter then will you write with your life, for… Amen

1. Lamar Williamson, *Interpretation Commentary: Mark*, John Knox Press: Louisville, 1983, p.283 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. “Unhappy states of America: Well-being drops amid an improving economy, data says:”, Heather Long, *The Washington Post*, March 31, 2018, p.A11 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)