



**"Easter Message"**  
**Scripture – Mark 16:1-8**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, April 4, 2021**

Remember last Easter? We had just closed the doors of the church to in-person gatherings. Many of us rarely ventured out of our homes. We were in the early stages of the pandemic and struggling to comprehend that more than a thousand people a day were dying of COVID-19. Never had we experienced such a contagious disease that was so lethal. We wore masks and kept away from others.

I went to the grocery early when it was limited to seniors. The first time I did this I assumed the young woman guarding the entrance would pull me aside and say, "I'm sorry sir, this time is for seniors only." She didn't.

Most of us entering the store wore rubber gloves. I did my best to keep a healthy distance from others. At times that required doing a quick U turn when a grocery cart was headed my way. On those occasions when I was trapped in the middle of an aisle with carts coming from both directions, I hugged the shelves and held my breath until they passed.

Once I returned home, I piled the items on the kitchen counter and Camilla scrubbed each one with Lysol. The daily mail received the same treatment. After touching anything from outside our home, we washed our hands with hot water and soap as we sang or hummed "Happy Birthday" to insure a death blow to any coronavirus we might have unwittingly picked up.

Easter was one of our first online worship services. We had not yet graduated to livestreaming so various parts of the service were recorded separately on Friday afternoon. The musicians recorded their music and then exited the building. Sudie and I recorded our parts separately and we tried to appear as if all was normal, even though the sanctuary was completely empty. I never felt at ease speaking only to a camera.

The jubilant proclamation of Easter did not seem especially joyful with no choir, no brass, no congregational singing, no children, and no smiling faces. Last year, Easter morning felt more like we were stuck on Good Friday afternoon. In fact, haven't the past 12 months felt like Good Friday?

Perhaps this provides us with a unique opportunity to relate to that day when the women found the empty tomb. As we know, the first Easter did not begin with elegant lilies, shouts of joy, and the Hallelujah Chorus. It began with tears and fear and despair as deep as the Grand Canyon.

Since Jesus died on Friday afternoon, the disciples had to rush to entomb his body before sundown and the beginning of the sabbath. There was not enough time to anoint the body according to Jewish custom. So early Sunday morning, after the sabbath, three women drag themselves to the tomb to complete the burial ritual by anointing his body. They did not dash to the tomb in hopes of discovering a risen Christ. Instead, they wonder aloud to one another "Who will roll away the stone for us?"

Completing the burial ritual was one reason they felt compelled to trek to the tomb. However, I suspect there was at least one other reason. Like us, when we have lost a loved one, we yearn to say one last "Goodbye."

Do you know the feeling of having your world crumble? Have you had a calamity upend your life and you wish you could reset the calendar to the time before the disaster struck?

After the death of a loved one, after losing a job, after a divorce, it's natural to resist the new reality and to fear what the future holds.

This is the story of the first Easter. The followers of Jesus were distraught after he was executed. Early on Sunday morning, following a sleepless night, three women went to anoint his body. Yet when they reach the gravesite, the stone had already been shoved aside. What thoughts must have run through their minds? Has the tomb been desecrated by vandals? Have the devious Romans set a trap to ensnare his followers?

The women garnered the courage to set foot inside the tomb and, when they did, they realized the body of Jesus was nowhere in sight. A young man in a white robe stunned them with a message that struck them like a bolt of lightning. He said, "Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here. He has been raised!" Further, he issued instructions. "Go to the disciples and tell them that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; you will see him there." Then we read that final, unsettling verse of Mark's gospel: "They went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

Various interpreters of Mark's gospel have attempted to explain the odd ending. Some suggest that there must have been a more satisfying ending in Mark's original manuscript, but it was somehow lost. Some suggest that very early in the process of transcribing copies of the gospel, the last page of the original somehow fell off and disappeared. This strikes me as about as likely as the student who tells the teacher that his report is incomplete because his dog ate the last page.

Even more amusing, one melodramatic interpreter suggests that Mark was in the process of writing the final sentences, when suddenly he dropped dead!<sup>1</sup>

Really? I don't think so. Mark ended his gospel this way on purpose. First, because the women and the disciples were afraid. Their world had crumbled and their future was thrown into disarray. The one who had opened their door to new possibilities, to a life that counted, and to a beautiful hope they had never known, had been snatched from them. The way forward had suddenly become cloaked in question marks. They feared that darkness, despair, and death had won the day.

Of course, we know that fear did not have the final word. Something jolted those first followers and transformed their fear into intrepid faith. The women and the disciples experienced the risen Christ. They caught a glimpse of glorious life after death and, it was so powerful, that these timid followers became courageous messengers.

The second reason Mark ended his gospel the way he did was because he did not want to leave the impression that the resurrection of Christ was the conclusion of the story. The story continues and we are supposed to be a part of it.

What was it the messenger of God said? "He has been raised; he is not here. Go, tell his disciples that he is out ahead of you. Catch up with him in Galilee." Why Galilee? What's that supposed to mean? Galilee is where Jesus called his first disciples and where he taught and healed and fed and challenged and cleansed. We will find Jesus wherever there is human need.

The resurrection of Jesus serves as a sign that God is not finished. Resurrection is emblematic of God's activity in the world. When death appears to have won the day, God brings new possibilities for life. Where death tries to put a period, God says, "To be continued."

Look at the natural world right now. All that was brown is turning green. Flowers that had been entombed in the ground are showing signs of life as green shoots pierce upward through the soil. The natural world is screaming RESURRECTION because it is the pattern of the universe. Things die so that there can be new life.

Retired pastor Martin Copenhaver was once challenged to summarize the gospel in just seven words. He pondered it for a while and here's what he came up with: "God gets the last word." Yes, he knows that's only five words, but that's all it took. God gets the last word. That is the overriding theme in the gospels and all of Scripture. God gets the last word, "and it is always a word of healing, a word of liberation, a words of hope, a word of life."<sup>2</sup>

A year ago, when the pandemic struck, death was constantly on our minds. There was no way to avoid thinking about the fact that we, or one of our loved ones, might contract the virus.

It was during this time that philosopher George Yancy published several interviews in the *New York Times*. Yancy interviewed people of different faiths and no faith. He asked them what they believed about death.

He asked a Buddhist monk how he faces death. The monk said, "If we learn to celebrate life for its ephemeral beauty, its coming and going, we can make peace with its end."<sup>3</sup>

He asked a Jew who is a professor in the Department of Religion at Princeton what Judaism teaches about death. He interviewed a Muslim and people from other faiths, including a Christian theologian named Karen Teel who teaches at the University of San Diego.

Yancy said to Professor Teel, "I read recently that cosmologist Stephen Hawking said, 'There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark.' How do you respond to the charge that Christians who believe in an afterlife are just really afraid of the dark, that is, afraid of facing the inevitability of nothingness?"

Teel said, "When my mother was 59, she was diagnosed with a terminal illness. The disease's progression was gradual and relentless... [Eventually] she needed help with everything."

"During Mom's last weeks — especially after she asked us to stop feeding her, when we took turns sitting with her around the clock, so that she would not die alone — I realized two things. First: She was going to die soon, and second, I believed that I would see her again. This had nothing to do with being afraid of losing her. I knew I was losing her. We had known it for three years...But I also believed, with a conviction I had never before felt,

that she would not cease to exist upon her death. She was going to join her parents, and one day I would see them all again. Before facing my mother's death, I never really knew that I believed that life continues. I still don't expect others to believe it. But I know it as I know the sun will come up in the morning, as I know I'll get wet in the rain, as I know I love my own children. It isn't about fear. It's a gift and a mystery, this conviction that we come from love and we return to love."<sup>4</sup>

Some may think that eternal life is a fairy tale, wishful thinking, or fake news. And hasn't this pandemic reminded us of how cruel and abrupt death can be? However, the message of Easter reminds us that the best death can muster is the **pen**ultimate word. God has the ultimate say.

The pandemic has been with us for more than a year now and whether conscious or unconscious, fear has been doing a number on our psyches. But now, finally, we are beginning to feel a sense of relief. We have received – or we are about to receive – our vaccine for COVID-19. Our hope goes by the name of Moderna or Pfizer or Johnson and Johnson. On this Easter day, we rejoice that God has a vaccine for our fears. It goes by the name of resurrection, rebirth, new life!

#### NOTES

1. Reginald Fuller, *The Formation of the Resurrection Narratives*, (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p.64.
2. Martin B. Copenhaver, "Preaching on Easter in a Good Friday Season," *Journal for Preachers: Easter 2021*, p.13.
3. George Yancy, "How Does a Buddhist Monk Face Death?" *The New York Times*, February 26, 2020.
4. George Yancy, "I Believed That I Would See Her Again," *The New York Times*, May 20, 2020.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

On this Easter morning, we join our voices with the chorus of creation to proclaim: "Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!" Living Lord, you have turned our mourning into dancing; you have wiped away our tears and clothed us in joy. We rejoice that the grave could not hold your son, for you have defeated death and opened the way to eternal life. So, with glad hearts and joyful voices, we praise you, O God of Life.

No matter how many times we hear the familiar story – of stone rolled away, of grave clothes cast aside – we cannot quite fathom the messenger's words: "He has been raised; he is not here." It can be hard to believe such joyous news, especially after the year we've had — a year measured by food lines and job losses and death tolls. It can be hard to believe such joyous news whenever we, personally, have reason to grieve — whether we mourn the death of a loved one, the death of a relationship, the death of an identity, or the death of a dream. Sometimes, it can be hard to believe, O God.

And, yet, we cling to the promise of resurrection — for ourselves, for our communities, for our nation, for our world. We cling to the promise of resurrection for all in need of hope.

Faithful God, we lift before you all who feel trapped in a 'Good Friday' world, who cannot glimpse the brightness of Easter morn. Bring comfort to those who feel death's sharp sting, and hope to those entombed by despair. Breathe reassurance into the hearts of those who cannot imagine the day you will turn their mourning into dancing, and send whispers of resurrection through rooms where fear still holds sway. Wrap these sisters and brothers in the steadfastness of your love, and fill them with peace.

God of Life – We know that Easter is not the end of the story. The Risen Lord is on the loose! He is going ahead of us into a world that is desperate for good news, and he is calling us to follow ... You have already given us so

much, O God. But we are bold to ask for a little more ... Give us what we need to follow Christ. Give us creativity and courage, generosity and grace. Give us compassion in the face of suffering, love in the face of indifference, and hope in the face of despair. Beckon us beyond fear, beyond doubt. And send us out, filled with joy and eager to share the good news.

We lift this prayer in the name of our Risen Lord, the one who gave us words to pray:

**Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**