

Do you know why you are here this morning? Do you know why you rolled out of bed and got dressed for this glorious Easter morning worship service?

The women, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome knew why they got up before dawn on what we now call Easter morn. Their dear friend and teacher, the one whom they had spent countless hours with in the past few years, had died a cruel death just hours before the sun set and the Sabbath began on Friday. Religious law prevented them from doing what needed to be done, for no work could be done during the Sabbath, and preparing a body for a proper burial would have been classified as work. As the Sabbath ended Saturday, with the sunset, the women decided to get up before dawn on Sunday and head to the tomb where Jesus had been placed. On Sunday they would prepare Jesus' body for his proper burial.

Why did the women get up that morning? To do what needed to be done, so they brought spices to anoint Jesus' lifeless body. Three women and one large stone. One large stone, and according to Matthew's Gospel, guards who were stationed by Pilate to make sure it was not opened. Pilate placed the guards at the request of the chief priests and Pharisees for they had made a persuasive argument. They said, "Pilate, we remember what that imposter said while he was still alive, 'After three days I will rise again.' Therefore, command the tomb to be made secure until the third day; otherwise his disciples may go and steal him away and tell the people, 'He has been raised from the dead, and the last deception would be worse than the first.'"

And so the women on their way to the tomb wondered, "Who would roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?" Would they be able to accomplish their "Why?" Would they be able to anoint and prepare Jesus' lifeless body for a proper burial? The women made their way in the dark, as the first hue of a new day was breaking over the Galilean landscape. They made their way expecting to encounter death.

When the women arrived, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. Without hesitation they entered the tomb, for this was not the first time they had prepared a body. They knew what to do. They knew the ritual. They even knew what to expect, the smells, the texture, the reality of life drained from a physical body.

Yet, when they entered the tomb, death was not present. Instead, a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side of the tomb alarmed them. Do you remember why they had come? To anoint the dead! Yet, now they were faced with life. When have you expected death, only to be faced with life?

A young man greeted them and said, "Do not be afraid." This is a classic line from scripture, and we heard it at the beginning of Jesus' story in the Gospel of Luke, for an angel said to his mother Mary, "Do not be afraid!" More often than not, this phrase is followed by an action that God is or will be taking, as in Mary's case, "And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus." This biblical phrase though, "do not be afraid," is not a suggestion, it is a command!

"Do not be alarmed; for you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified." This is stating the obvious. This is why the women came to the tomb. Jesus was crucified. Jesus was dead. Jesus' body needed to be prepared for a proper burial.

But, the young man continued speaking, "He has been raised; he is not here." I am sure the women had grasped this truth at this point, but its reality had not yet sunk in. How could it? They expected death, not a conversation with a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right. I marvel at the level of detail from Mark in this story, as his Gospel is usually short on detail. His gospel is only sixteen chapters, yet the other three are at least 21 chapters and as many as 28! But not here, as Mark provides details as if to help the women grasp that they are facing life, not death.

The young man even points to the place where the body was laid, "Look, there is the place that Joseph of Arimathea had laid Jesus' body wrapped in white linen." Look, look, Jesus

is not there! “So, go, tell his disciples, especially Peter, that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; and there you will see him, just as he told you.”

The text tells us that the women went out of the tomb. But then they fled. They ran as fast as they could with a mixture of terror and amazement gripping them. The text also says, “They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

For just a moment, try not to judge these women. Just try and place yourself in the story. Try to imagine experiencing what has just transpired. Try to imagine life, not the death you expected, to both amaze and terrify you. And then ask yourself, “why” you might be afraid of this story, that speaks of life and not death.

In Mark’s telling of the Easter story there is no resurrection appearance of Christ. There is also no going and telling, for the women are seized with terror and are silent. This is why this version of the story is rarely preached on Easter Sunday. We prefer the other gospel versions, for in Matthew and John, Jesus appears to the women or in Luke, the women at least go and tell. Mark’s version leaves us in an awkward place, so much so that early Christians extended the text, not once, but twice providing for endings that “must” have been intended. Early Christians just couldn’t stomach the silence -- that not one of the women proclaimed the risen Christ.

Yet this Easter, let’s dare to stay with the text and not gloss over its abrupt ending. Let’s return to the women whose tongues were frozen in fear. Let’s remember these women.

Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome had experienced Jesus’ life transforming ministry. They had seen him restore withered hands, paralyzed limbs and blinded eyes. They had heard him teach about the kingdom of God that had come near through him. They knew he healed a demonic, a woman who had suffered for twelve years, and restored a young girl’s life. They feasted with the disciples when five loaves and two fishes fed over five thousand. They watched him bless the children and listened to him teach in parables. They supported him as he sent his disciples out two by two, commissioning them to cast out spirits and heal the sick. The women had experienced something new, something different, something miraculous, in and through Jesus in their own lives and in the lives of others. Jesus was their Messiah, the long-awaited hope for the world.

Yet, in the past three days, they had experienced the death of their hopes. Their dream of a world as Jesus proclaimed and lived, was dead. That is why they went to the tomb. The dream was dead... but so was the demand to actively participate in bringing the kingdom of God near now. This ritual practice of anointing Jesus’ body would bury their responsibility for participating in Jesus’ vision of what could be. Could it be that in three short days, the women had resigned themselves to letting go of the possibility that the world could be different?

Have you ever felt a sense of relief when something you were responsible for was canceled? Have you ever enjoyed relaxing into the freedom that a cancelation of responsibilities provided? That morning the women knew what needed to be done at the tomb. That morning they also knew they would no longer be asked to participate in this kingdom of compassion and justice, mercy and love. They were going to do their ritual duty and then go home to grieve. End of responsibilities, end of the demands on their lives of following this Jesus, end of story.

Is it really any wonder that alarm, shock, fear, and even terror welled up within them? Oh no! The story has not ended. On no, more will be demanded of me. On no, Jesus is alive! Oh no, what will Jesus will call us to do now? And oh no, look what happened to Jesus...what will happen to us?

Oh, I imagine the women wanted to desperately believe, but there was fear. They feared faith, feared how they would be called to respond to the resurrected Christ. I believe feared faith realistically describes their response and our response to the empty tomb.

Think about it...who among us hasn’t feared the consequences of believing in this power that resurrected Jesus? Who among us has not kept silent, fearing the consequences of

believing and acting as Christ calls us to do? Who has not fled in terror from the responsibility of following the resurrected Christ into this broken and hurting world?

This uncomfortable ending to the resurrection account in the Gospel of Mark gives us the opportunity to ask ourselves some very blunt questions this Easter.

Do you remember my opening question: Why are you here this morning?

Why do you do what you do on any given day? Why?

American author Annie Dillard captures for me why faith in this risen Christ is so often feared, for she writes, "Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews, for God may draw us out to where we can never return."

Why were the women afraid? Because they knew God would draw them out to where they could never return. They knew their lives would never be the same if they were to follow this risen Jesus.

What about you? Could this be why you are here this morning? Could you be here so that God can draw you out to where you can never return?

There is good reason to fear faith in this risen Christ, as these women did according to the Gospel of Mark. There is good reason, for I speak from experience, for claiming faith in this risen Christ will draw you out to where you can never return not once, but over and over and over again.

But there is one more thing that uncomfortable Gospel ending helps us grasp. God alone makes our own faith stories possible. The women's silence in this gospel wasn't the end of the story. God gave the women courage to claim faith, just read the rest of the story as it unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles.

Why are you here? Why are we here as a church? I hope and pray it is to be a part of God's continuing story, where life breaks forth again and again, when and where only death was expected. Risk faith even though you have fears, it is worth the adventure of being drawn out to where you can never return! Amen.