



Easter Sunday, April 12, 2020

What Are You Hoping to Find at the Tomb?
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Mark 16:1-8 ¹When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. ²Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb ³and they asked each other, "Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?" ⁴But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. ⁵As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. ⁶"Don't be alarmed," he said. "You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'" ⁸Trembling and bewildered, the women went out and fled from the tomb. They said nothing to anyone, because they were afraid.

Blaise Pascal was a French mathematician in the 17th century. He once made the claim: "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." Doesn't that sound ironic these days? There's no way Pascal was thinking of Coronavirus, of course, and of the need for social distancing, but he might have been imagining our lives before Coronavirus. You remember: the relentless pace of our days; going here, there, and everywhere; and our calendars filled to the brim with so many things. Pascal seems to suggest that there's something to be gained by occasionally sitting in stillness, instead of living as loudly as we do.



For the past couple months, the often-loud and relentless pace of our lives has been totally upended. Covid-19 has arrived. The virus has spread, businesses have closed, jobs have been lost. Sadly, people have been infected: some have ended up in the hospital, and—tragically—some have died. To help slow the spread, we've been asked to stay home, to sit quietly in rooms alone or, in the case of families, to figure out how to inhabit the same small space and get along with each other as they do. Things are upended at church too. Who knew streaming would prove to be so valuable? Who knew people could attend worship in their pajamas? Did we even know what Zoom was before this got started? I didn't. But I do now.

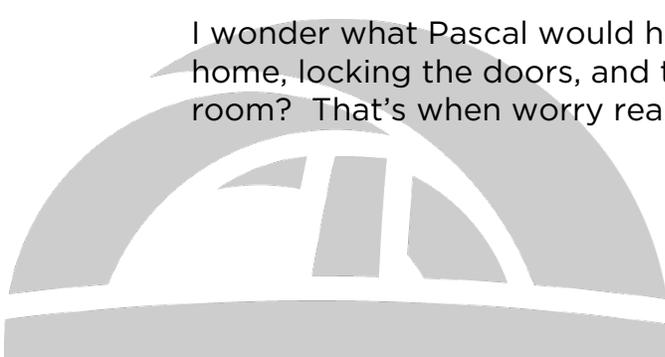
So, we sit quietly in a room alone. To be honest, the quiet can feel a bit overwhelming, so we turn on the TV, find something on Netflix, listen to the latest round of Coronavirus briefings. Part of the problem with the stillness is that worry often bubbles up. There are so many things we just don't know, and that troubles us. How long is this pandemic going to last? Can I go to the grocery store? Will I be able to pay my bills? When can we schedule the postponed wedding? The baptism? The funeral? What if a loved one gets sick, and I can't be with them? With all due respect to Pascal, sitting quietly in a room these days isn't exactly our cup of tea

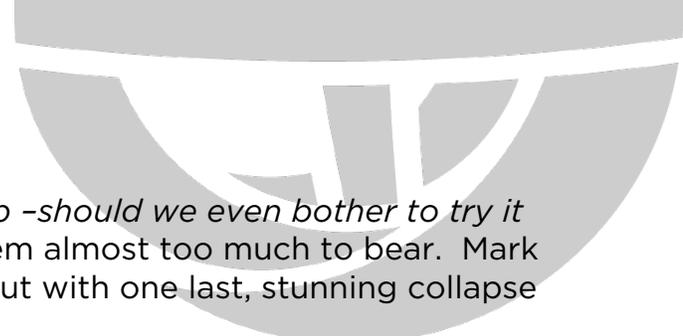
Mary Magdalene and the other women head out for the tomb. Their dear friend and rabbi has died. They've been following him ever since Galilee. And now he's dead and gone...done in by an angry mob who were out for blood. The women are hoping to anoint his body. They probably don't know that Jesus has already been anointed—beforehand—by a kind woman from Bethany. The women's hearts are a blur of fear and uncertainty. Who's going to roll away the stone for us? When should we go back to Galilee? How does a person go on with a broken heart?

The women round the last corner. To their utter surprise, they find the stone is already rolled back. They're brave enough to peak inside. They find a young man dressed in a white robe. "You're alarmed," he says, "don't be. You're looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He's not here. He's been raised! Go, tell Peter and the others that he's going ahead to Galilee. You will find him there, just as he told you."

So far, so good, right? Easter is the greatest story ever told! It's to start with the women. But they flee from the tomb. Fear and uncertainty grip them. And they say nothing to anyone because they are afraid.

I wonder what Pascal would have said to them. I can imagine them heading home, locking the doors, and trying to keep the world out. But to sit quietly in a room? That's when worry really takes off: *Was all the effort worth it? Can Jesus*





still be trusted? Here, we'd gotten our hopes up -should we even bother to try it again? Sometimes our fear and uncertainty seem almost too much to bear. Mark ends his gospel, not with the story spreading, but with one last, stunning collapse of Jesus' followers.

What are you hoping to find at the tomb this Easter? Whatever it is, I have a hunch it feels different than most anything you've ever experienced. The steady drumbeat of Covid-19 is with us day in and day out. We're encouraged by stories of valor from those on the front line: those stocking grocery shelves, those delivering mail, those tending to the sick and elderly.

At the same time, we wonder about what's coming next. As the virus has spread across the country, the stories have hit closer to home. This past week, Erikka Giere of Zumbro tested positive for Coronavirus. She has a cough. She's lost her sense of smell. And she feels like she has a cold, and is tired. Erikka lives in a group home here in Rochester with three other young women. All of them have tested positive. One of them, Melanie, has been Erikka's good friend ever since childhood. Right now, the housemates are not eating meals together. They mostly stay in their rooms.

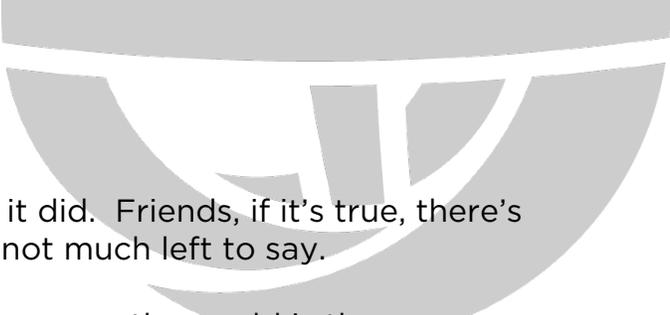
I called Erikka after hearing of the test results. I pledged our support. We spent time in prayer. I wished her well. Erikka was trying her best to be positive. With all the courage she could muster, she said to me: "I can get through this!" And she meant it. I responded, "We will be praying for you, and, as much as we're able, we will stand with you."

That's the hard part these days—the distance. But we do need to be alone, at least some of the time, for our own sake and for others. Thankfully we have cell phones, and FaceTime, and email, and Zoom, and a variety of other ways to stay connected. But it's not quite the same, is it?

As a church, we join Erikka in her resolve. It feels like a statement of faith: "We can get through this!" We're not gathering on Sundays and Wednesdays for in-person worship, and it's probably going to be awhile before we do. But we're working to create moments of interaction, many of them digital: phone trees, women's circles, prayer times, Open Table meals shared. The time we spend together is important. There's strength in community, whether face-to-face or online. We're physically distant, but faithfully together.

Back in the second century, Saint Ignatius described Easter like this: "Jesus rose in the silence of God." I like that. It seems more appropriate than ever. It puts Easter squarely on the shoulders of God. It's an event shrouded in mystery. It happened in the dark, in the quiet of a Sunday morning. No one expected help to





come. And no one was there to witness it when it did. Friends, if it's true, there's not much left to say. And if it's not true, there's not much left to say.

What are you hoping to find at the tomb? In one sense, the world is the same as before Easter – it's shrouded in fear and uncertainty. Yet, in another sense, the world is not the same. God has acted. The tomb is empty. Jesus is out and he's on the loose.

Oh, this can be so hard to believe at times.. The women, like all of us, need redemption. They are terrified. Their world is shrouded in darkness and disappointment. Their eyes must be opened, their ears unstopped, their tongues loosened. If an Easter faith is to be born, it will happen not simply by human resolve, but because God has made it so.

To be honest, we don't know exactly how Mark's Easter story turns out. Here's what I think: the women eventually take it to heart; they come to believe the words of the angel, and slowly—maybe one day at a time—they come to trust that Jesus has gone on ahead to Galilee, just as he told them. They will meet him there and he will show them the way forward.

Can you believe it? And can you believe it even in the midst of a global pandemic? Maybe this will help. It's a simple poem by Philip Booth. It's about teaching his daughter to float in the ocean. It says: "As you float now, where I held you\and let go, remember when fear\cramps your heart what I told you:/lie gently and wide to the light-year\stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you."

This is something of the promise of Easter—hope that we are being held in a wide embrace. Easter doesn't release us from worry and responsibility, but it does promise that worry and responsibility need not consume us. Easter promises that suffering and failure are not final. No, in a world of Covid-19, the Risen Lord comes to reassure us: "I will still the pounding of your hearts, and I will replace it with the stillness of a deep and abiding trust."

Friends, in this long and extended season of Lent, fear and uncertainty abound. But take heart. We can get through this! Christ is risen! Trust him! When we come to the end of our strength, like Philip Booth's daughter on the ocean, we should lie back and trust that the God of Easter will hold us always.

Christ is risen! Chris is risen indeed!

