

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

Machias, Maine

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Easter 2021

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Let us pray . . .

Happy Easter, Beloveds! This is Christianity's most profound morning and yet, I always feel an uncomfortable rending in my deep self as I prepare this day's sermon. The material is Holy and complicated. I envy the preachers who are *thrilled* when this particular Sunday rolls around, hardly able to wait to give the good news.

Don't get me wrong, I love to proclaim good news, but the thing is, this good news has a vastness to it that can be difficult to convey — let alone believe or agree upon — even though the good news makes space for everybody. So you can bet that I experienced my own version of *thrilled* when, in shaping my message, I read right from the beginning of our lesson in Mark's Gospel,

When the sabbath was over.

Was over.

Yes, yes, that's what I need!

I need this to be *over*.

I need a lot of things to be over.

We need many things to be over.

With all the energy and storying that lands on this morning, we'll no doubt experience all kinds of obvious "overs" by the end of the day. The baskets and eco-friendly grass will look exhausted, the plastic eggs open and empty like the tomb, crumpled little foil wrappers here and there, and more than one marshmallow peep — no doubt — is headless.

And later today there will likely be many a container holding what's left *over* from dinner — be it the ham or the lamb, green beans, mashed potatoes and other favorites stored in your fridge. I'm a corn person myself.

Then there's the theological side of things that, well, actually is never over

From guessing the resurrection may have looked like a blinding flash (Richard Rohr), to Jesus was buried in a shallow grave, but dogs dug him up and ate him (John Dominic Crossan), to the grave was robbed (a handful of scholars), to — for most believers — myth-making in its finest form or an unquestioned literal event.

The curious thing about Mark's Gospel though is that the original ending, which Lynne read for us, leaves us standing in utter uncertainty because *after the sabbath was over*, the Holy bottom line was that the women found the tomb empty.

There is no resurrection appearance.

In the face of the empty tomb, there is terror and amazement . . . and so much fear that they don't tell *anyone* — they flee.

Most scholars agree that the original story as captured in Mark's Gospel was written before Matthew, Luke and John, around the year 70, plus or minus. Actually, there's a period of about 40 years separating the death of Jesus and the writing of his life story. While we don't know much during this time, we do know that the early Christians were engaged in a common activity: Oral story-telling. And through that process, believers passed on the story of Jesus' life and teachings, sharing what he stood

for and what he did, telling and retelling the stories across decades. And across time, they also shape and confirm who Jesus is for themselves.

Most of you know me pretty well by now. So you can — no doubt — imagine that Mark’s Gospel with its original ending is actually my favorite Easter text . . . even though it is disturbingly and seemingly unfinished. I find that so redemptive because doesn’t that describe a faith journey in the more blurry places? Disturbing and seemingly unfinished?

Markan scholar Lamar Williamson writes, “Mark’s ending is no end; only the reader can bring closure.” Which might be another way of saying, only the reader — **YOU** — can decide when and how the story is over.

There’s that word again.

Over

As people of faith — or at least as people of some curiosity — we tend to approach the words in the Bible in the hopes of trying to understand historical events and receive reassurances and meaning when it comes to the things of God. In that light, I believe we also have the capacity to recognize the “living word” or the spirit that mysteriously dwells within sacred texts when we notice its power to interrupt us, getting our attention in surprising ways and speaking to us on deep levels.

Was over

In the original Greek, the word used to talk about something being over or having passed is *diaginomai* (dee-ag-in-om-ahee).

Besides being a fun word to say, this verb, this action word, means “to go through, to elapse” and it is used to speak of time as a continuation and an intervening and a passing — and isn’t that precisely how we spend our time in relationship to and with God/“The More”/The Divine?

And for Christians, while this relationship was experienced and understood in and through the life of Jesus as a time-bound event, this relationship is elapsing and perceived as a continuation through time and embodied in Christ — intervening and passing across and within our lives while eclipsing our capacity to fully understand what it wholly and HOLY means.

I finished writing this sermon a few days ago from my mother's backyard in Brunswick, in southern Maine. Actually, by the time you hear these words it is someone else's backyard, for Max and I went down to attend the closing. My brother and I did a final walk through of mom's house 4 days ago and I was flooded with memory upon memory as I moved from empty room to empty room. In my own way, I too wanted to flee in terror and amazement. There is nothing like death to leave you knowing the pain of being fully alive.

I want the sorrow and grief to be *over*.

I bring this up because the fullness of the resurrection story necessarily begins with the profound sorrow and grief of Jesus' passion. Jesus' story is a reminder that we all know emptiness and deep pain. There is not one of us here who is not intimately familiar with these places in life. But the beautiful mercy and the good news of the Easter story is that those things are — not to minimize — but they are simply parts of a mysterious and transcendent whole.

And the fullness of the whole story holds us in this beautiful and vexing quality of time that actually isn't ever over. It continues and intervenes, elapsing and passing and moving us in and through a cycle that is necessarily painful and lonely at times — where we are met in utter emptiness. And if we can stand to bear that place, we too might hear a voice reassuring us that *He has been raised, he is not here* — which is the story's way of conveying that it is not over, there is some type of continuation, some type of more-ness.

Beloveds, the power of Easter morning means that our pain *and* our suffering are **met in the exact same place** we hold both terror and amazement — which is the very language Scripture uses when talking about encounters with God. That means The Divine meets us in our pain and sorrow, creating something new, something so baffling that we widely disagree on how to talk about it, how to understand it or even how to hold it.

So as I get older, I love the Easter story's invitation to stand inside an empty tomb.

And sigh.

And bring everything we have to that sacred intersection.

All of our pain,

all of our sorrow,

all of our doubt,

all of our fear,

all of our reservations,

all of our hope

Because *all of that* and no doubt more, was met in the empty tomb.

My prayer is that across this Sacred and mystifying day, you let the tomb hold open the way to consider the emptiness that is absorbed into the great unknowingness of God. It is in *that* place where nothing is ever over. Where all our fears and doubts and hopeless conclusions fall apart in the face of an ineffable continuum that makes it possible for us

To hope again

To breath again

And because of Christ, to live again

Amen ~