Congregational Church of Pinehurst

United Church of Christ

April 5, 2015

Easter(B)

Isaiah 25:6-9

Mark 16:1-8

***The Beginning of the Good News***

Happy Easter my friends!

I’m here to tell you on this beautiful Easter morning

that if you think a dead man

being raised from the dead is shocking (and it is!),

hang on to your hats!

‘Cause I’m about to do something

that pastors in Progressive Christian churches

rarely do in worship.

I’m gonna ask you to take out your Bibles!

And if you can, find the gospel of Mark.

And then find the end of chapter 16 (pg.55).

And when you find it,

your gonna’ notice that there is something mighty funny

going on here.

There are 3 separate endings to this gospel story.

The other 3 gospels hand this story of resurrection to us

all boxed up and tied with a bow.

Jesus dies on the Cross,

and is buried,

and on the third day rises again,

and then Jesus appears to folks---

Mary, then the other disciples,

and then to the 2 on the road to Emmaus.

But not good ole’ Mark.

Mark’s gospel---the earliest of all the gospels---

leaves us with a choice.

And that’s why Mark’s gospel has become my favorite.

And here’s the choice Mark leaves us with.

We can accept the longer versions of Mark---

which are almost certainly the later attempts of others,

perhaps embarrassed by Mark’s abrupt ending,

to box up the resurrection and tie it with a bow.

Or we can linger a while longer with the uncertainty

of what was most probably Mark’s original story.

In this original story,

the women make their way to the tomb

on that fateful Sabbath morning,

three days after Jesus death.

And what they find

sends them running off in terror and amazement.

Because what they found, according to Mark’s story,

was an ***empty*** tomb

where there was supposed to be a tomb

with a dead man still in it.

And that might send anyone running off

and screaming at the top of their lungs.

But I think larger point of Mark’s abrupt original ending is this:

the resurrection is not an end point,

but it is rather the touchstone for the ongoing,

liberating action of God.

To get Mark’s understanding of resurrection,

you have to go back to the start of his story.

Mark begins his gospel with the words,

“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, God’s Beloved.”

You could take that to mean that Mark is referring to

the beginning of the story about Jesus

that he is about to tell.

Or you could take that to mean

that the entire Gospel of Mark---

from start to finish----

is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.

It is the beginning of a good news

that is supposed to continue to unfold

far beyond the earthly life of Jesus.

In other words, Jesus’ resurrection is not an endpoint,

but is rather the spark

that sets the process of resurrection loose in the world,

backwards and forwards,

for all times and all places.

It is the ***beginning*** of the good news of resurrection.

And we are called to receive the energy of Jesus’ resurrection,

and run screaming with it into the world,

breaking the initial silence of those first disciples,

and passing it on to all we meet.

In Dr. Martin Luther King’s famous 1968

“I’ve Been to the Mountaintop Speech”---

the speech that he delivered

the night before the planned Memphis Sanitation Worker’s strike--

the night before he was shot and killed.

King imagines himself

taking a panoramic view of human history

from the beginning up to the present day,”

And then King imagines God asking him

which age he would prefer to live in?

And King replies,

*I would take my mental flight by Egypt*

*and I would watch God’s children in their magnificent trek*

*from the dark dungeons of Egypt through,*

*or rather across, the Red Sea,*

*through the wilderness on toward the promised land.*

*And in spite of its magnificence,*

*I wouldn’t stop there.*

*I would move on by Greece and take my mind to Mount Olympus.*

*And I would see Plate, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides,*

*and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon.*

*And I would watch them around the Parthenon*

*as they discussed the great and eternal issues of reality.*

*But I wouldn’t stop there.*\*

As the speech unfolds---through the Roman Empire

and the Renaissance and the Reformation

and the Emancipation Proclamation

and up to the New Deal---“I wouldn’t stop there”

becomes a rhetorical refrain, building to a crescendo.

At last, King tells the Almighty:

*“If you allow me to live just a few years*

*in the second half of the twentieth century,*

*I will be happy.”*

I wonder if Mark’s view of resurrection is not unlike Dr. King’s.

All through history God has been ceaselessly working

to liberate humanity from the bondage of our fears,

and the oppressive systems

and damaging relationships that result.

God keeps resurrecting humanity each time it stumbles,

resurrecting it to the newness of life,

and the wholeness of community.

And that is the work of God

that Christians see most clearly in Jesus.

But Mark’s gospel seems clear

that if we stop there with Jesus

we have missed the point.

The Resurrection of Jesus---

whether we understand it as a physical resurrection,

or a spiritual one---

a metaphysical resurrection or a metaphorical one---

however we understand it,

the Resurrection of Jesus

unleashes the ongoing power of resurrection in the world,

backwards and forwards through time and space.

And we are called to take the experience of it

into our own lives

and to run with it.

Run with it into the world’s pain, sharing compassion.

Run with it into the world’s poverty, sharing economic justice.

Run with it into the world’s hatred,

sharing love and working for reconciliation.

Run with it into the world’s violence,

sharing the peace that passes all understanding.

If we courageously follow in the way of Jesus---

the way of love and justice and compassion and peace---

we make the Resurrection of Jesus

more than just a past event.

We receive its ongoing life

and carry its energy forward into the present life of the world.

By the end of his extemporaneous speech,

King had reached the top of the mountain

and he shouted out to the crowd outside the Lorraine Hotel:

*“We’ve got to give ourselves to this struggle until the end.*

*Nothing would be more tragic*

*than to stop at this point in Memphis.*

*I’ve been to the mountaintop,” he cries….*

*“And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land.*

*I may not get there with you.*

*But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people,*

*will get to the Promised Land!*

*And so I’m happy tonight;*

*I’m not worried about anything;*

*I’m not fearing any man.*

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”*\*

Perhaps the gospel of Mark gives us the same encouragement.

We may not make it to the promised land in this life.

Our world may not be fully transformed

into God’s Beloved Community before each of us dies.

But nothing would be more tragic

than for us to stop engaging in God’s transforming work.

Because Jesus’ death and resurrection

reveals to us God’s full intention for creation.

Jesus’ resurrection

has unleashed God’s resurrecting power into the world,

and it is only the beginning of the good news.

For God’s power of resurrection cannot be stopped---

Not by death---not by injustice----not by hate---not by fear.

The power of resurrection

is now and forever loose in the world.

And the invitation of Easter is to take it in

and run with it,

screaming with amazement and shouting out joyfully

to all we encounter.

Because Jesus is alive—

we too are alive---

and the Good News has only just begun.

Thanks be to God! Alleluia! Amen!

Rev. Brent A. Bissette

\*Excerpts are from Dr. King’s speech on April 3, 1968, commonly

referred to his “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop Speech”.