



## Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006

### WE APPROACH GOD

Prelude: "I know that my redeemer liveth" (organ, piano) Handel

Greeting: Christ is Risen!

Reply: **He is Risen indeed!**

All: **Alleluia!!**

Processional Hymn: 243 "Jesus Christ is Risen Today"

Prayer of Praise:

Choir Anthem: "Let the Trumpet Sound" Natalie Sleeth

Old Testament Responsive Reading: Song of Songs ch. 2 & 8

*Refrain:*

Hail, O fest-i-val day! blest day that all a-ges will cher-ish:  
day when the Christ was raised, break-ing the bond-age of death.

"He has been raised, he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him" (Mk 16.6)

M: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come with me.

<sup>11</sup> See! The winter is past; the rains are over and gone.

P: <sup>12</sup> **Flowers appear on the earth; the season of singing has come, the cooing of doves is heard in our land.**

<sup>13</sup> The fig tree forms its early fruit; the blossoming vines spread their fragrance.

**Arise, come, my love; my fair one, come with me."**

*Refrain*

<sup>6</sup> Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm; for love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave. Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.

<sup>7</sup> **Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it.**

<sup>13</sup> O you who dwell in the gardens, my companions are listening for your voice; let me hear it.

<sup>14</sup> **Make haste, my beloved, and be like a gazelle or a young stag upon the mountains of spices!**

*Refrain*

Hymn 260: "Alleluia, Alleluia, give thanks to the risen Lord"

Children's Sermon

Reading of the Gospel: Mark 16: 1-8 and shorter ending

16<sup>1</sup> When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. <sup>2</sup>And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. <sup>3</sup>They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ <sup>4</sup>When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. <sup>5</sup>As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. <sup>6</sup>But he said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. <sup>7</sup>But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’ <sup>8</sup>So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

[[And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterwards Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. ]]

(from the NRSV)

M: This is God's glorious gospel

P: **Amen! Alleluia!**

Prayer for Illumination:

Sermon: “He has been raised; he is not here.”

Well those of you who have been on board since September will have special cause for rejoicing today. After seven and a half months of preaching on the gospel of Mark we have at last reached the end. As a preacher it gives me great satisfaction to be able to say that every verse of every chapter has been read out in your hearing. Not all of it has received treatment in the preaching, but a good deal of it has. Personally, I have found it a very satisfying series to prepare and a great place at which to begin my preaching ministry. I hope it has given you something as well. I have somewhat disrupted the plot of Mark's gospel by arranging it according to the themes of the Christian year: so we had chapter 13 in November, for example, and reverted as far back as chapter 2 in January. Since the beginning of Lent we have been following the Way of the Cross which comes into prominence, especially from chapter 8 onwards. The Holy Week services allowed us to cover a lot of ground with the whole of chapter 14 being read on Thursday night, the whole of chapter 15 being read on Friday morning, and now this morning, the whole of chapter 16 and the shorter ending. We are going to put humpty dumpty back together again on the second Sunday of May when the choir will share a suite of music called the Song of Mark. It traces out the plot of Mark in order, so on that day we will have a reprise of the whole gospel of Mark presented in order.

The ending of Mark which we arrive at today has presented a problem to scholars of the New Testament. The original scroll of Mark ends rather abruptly with verse 8: “so they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Great ending, huh? “For they were afraid....” Early in the Christian tradition, there arose a such a feeling of dissatisfaction with this ending that people began to speculate about other ways for the gospel to end. It is possible that Mark did write more and that the original ending has been lost. There may have been a whole other scroll that got eaten by a goat, or went

fluttering off in the breeze. Other modern scholars, however, think that Mark intended to write his gospel as a cliffhanger. The early Christian copyists, we know, were not satisfied to end with the words “For they were afraid....”, because they added, first a shorter, and later, a longer, ending to round off the story more satisfactorily. The shorter ending is the one we read this morning, which appears in the square parentheses.

Now verses 1-8 of chapter 16, the part that is original to Mark, do not give us a story of Jesus appearing to anyone; they witness only to the empty tomb, and an angelic figure sitting there who announces that Christ has been raised. The longer ending has Jesus appearing, first, to Mary Magdalene, and it mentions that later he ate with the eleven disciples. The shorter ending does not tell of Jesus appearing to anyone, but it provides closure by saying that the disciples *do* go and spread the story, as they are bidden by the young man in white, who greets them at the empty tomb. If we only had the original verses 1-8, whether they do go and spread the story would be left as an open question.

My own view is that Mark did not write any other ending. Mark, I think, wants to put his reader in the story, rather in the way that choose-your-own-adventure books ask the reader to become a participant in finishing the plot. Do you remember those books? They enjoyed a brief popularity when I was about 8 or 9 years old. You would be reading about a young hero who was walking through the woods one day when he was set upon by a band of ruffians. If you wanted the ruffians to kidnap him you had to turn to page 15 to read the next part of the story. If you wanted him to fight the ruffians, killing a couple of them, and then be on the run for murder, you had to turn to page 59 to see how that avenue panned out.

Now we know, as the shorter ending says that through the testimony of those who were witnesses of the resurrection, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation was spread throughout the world from East to West. If the disciples had not gone out with the message, then there would never have been such a thing as the Christian church, and we would not be here today. We are an Easter people. The church exists because of the proclamation that Christ did not moulder away in some tomb, but was raised, really and truly, by God his Father. If he was not raised, then those who have put him to death have won. If he was not raised, then death itself has the last word. If he was not raised, then his life and all his teachings, are not vindicated – sealed with approval by God; Jesus' firm conviction that his death was about human salvation and the kingdom of God coming, are just the disappointed hopes and the unsubstantiated ravings of a false messiah. If he was not raised from the dead, then we ourselves have no hope of being raised to life with God. If he was not raised, the church simply would not be, because we would have nothing to say.

So we know that those who first heard the news of Christ's resurrection overcame their initial fear and did go on to share the story, but the point of Mark's cliffhanger is to put the question in our lap. Mark leaves the ball in our court. “Christ is raised. You have heard it. Now what do you have to say about that?” The gospel is not like any other story. It addresses us directly. It looks for a response from us – a response in our

belief and a response in our behaviour. Resurrection is not an idea. It is not a metaphor. It is not a story. It is a fact. It deals with an actual solid stone that gets rolled away and a real substantial body that comes to life again. Here's the nail print, says Jesus – touch it. I see you have dinner on the table – let me eat it. This is earthy stuff!

I recently discovered this poem by John Updike, called Seven Stanzas for Easter, and I love it. Here, listen to it:

Make no mistake: if He rose at all  
it was as His body;  
if the cells' dissolution did not reverse, the molecules reknit,  
the amino acids rekindle,  
the Church will fall.

It was not as the flowers,  
each soft Spring recurrent;  
it was not as His Spirit in the mouths and fuddled  
eyes of the eleven apostles;  
it was as His Flesh: ours.

The same hinged thumbs and toes,  
the same valved heart  
that - pierced - died, withered, paused, and then  
regathered out of enduring Might  
new strength to enclose.

Let us not mock God with metaphor,  
analogy, sidestepping transcendence;  
making of the event a parable, a sign painted in the  
faded credulity of earlier ages:  
let us walk through the door.

The stone is rolled back, not papier-mache,  
not a stone in a story,  
but the vast rock of materiality that in the slow  
grinding of time will eclipse for each of us  
the wide light of day.

And if we will have an angel at the tomb,  
make it a real angel,  
weighty with Max Planck's quanta, vivid with hair,  
opaque in the dawn light, robed in real linen  
spun on a definite loom.

Let us not seek to make it less monstrous,  
for our own convenience, our own sense of beauty,  
lest, awakened in one unthinkable hour, we are  
embarrassed by the miracle,  
and crushed by remonstrance.

It bears reading more than once. Take it home, pin it on the fridge, so you can read and reread it all this Easter week.

Udike is insisting that the resurrected Christ is not a notion, he is a real flesh and blood person. On the day of resurrection, Christianity is as far as can possibly be from anything abstract or airy-fairy. And that's why I say that resurrection looks for actual, real, historical, on-the-ground results, among us. Are we a people of the resurrection? If we are, then we will show that to the world with a faith that shines. With a life that shows a difference. Resurrection is not something we keep vaguely in our heads. It is the power we move in, our confidence in life, our hope in death, the spring in our step.

Resurrection is about *results*. If it says anything, it says that *God delivers*. The promise of God, which Christ believed, that his Father would not abandon him to death, has been most miraculously and wonderfully *kept*. The resurrection people of God are fruit-bearing people, who witness to the fact that God keep his promises and produces *results*. Mark's peculiar ending leaves the ball in our court. It leaves open the kind of results that will appear in us. That doesn't mean that it's all up to us now, that we shall ourselves choose whether we believe, and whether we will live radiant lives, for God. The resurrection means that we *can*. That we are *reasonably expected to*. And that by God's grace, we *will*. God will surely bring to fruition in the lives of his witnesses, the seeds that have been sown and which have lain for a season in the dark, good earth.

In a moment we will move to the part of our service where we receive new members into the church. The profession of faith by an adult believer is something we do and have done at other points in the Christian year but it is something which is particularly appropriate to do at Easter. The early church always saved up its adult baptisms, and later, its confirmations, and celebrated them in a big batch on Easter day. These women who will profess faith today are not so much making a choice for Christ and his church, as they are saying: "look I was baptised. I notice and I rejoice that God has brought to wondrous, fruit-bearing maturity in my life, the seed of Christian faith which was planted at my baptism, the desire for Christian faith which was proclaimed over me as I went under the waters. God is a God who produces results. I know that the power of resurrection is real and ongoing in the present, for God has raised me to newness of life in union with my Lord. He has begun my eternal life in the here and now, and I confidently believe that he will raise me to eternal life hereafter."

Mark's gospel ends by inviting all of us to cease being spectators and to begin living as participants – participants in God's kingdom, in Christ's servanthood and in the victory of his resurrection life. Praise to the God of resurrection, who brings results. Who continues to give new life to people in the present, and praise be to the Risen Christ who is here among us.

Hymn: 259 "This Joyful Eastertide"

Affirmation of Faith: from *Living Faith* 3.5.1-2, 10.4 and 3.5.3&5

Reception of New Members:

Call for the Offering:

Doxology and Prayer of Dedication:

Being Christ's Community

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession with the Lord's Prayer:

Hymn: 258 "*Thine Be the Glory*"

Benediction:

Postlude: *Gigue on Jesus Christ is Risen Today* (organ& brass) Albrecht