



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

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**Easter Sunday**

**March 27, 2016**

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**“What Now?”**

*(Mark 16:8)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (Mark 16:8).*

**COLLECT:** Almighty God the Father, through Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ, You have overcome death and opened the gate of everlasting life to us. Grant that we, who celebrate with joy the day of our Lord's resurrection, may be raised from the death of sin by Your life-giving Spirit; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Alleluia! Christ is Risen!  
**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

That's the way we expect the Gospel account of Easter to end . . . with a strong and confident affirmation of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But in his Gospel, Mark doesn't give that to us. His account doesn't end with Easter alleluias. It ends with fear and silence. Hear again the very last sentence from the book of Mark: "The women fled from the tomb and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Fear and silence.

Now, in your pew Bibles there is an additional ending. But the earliest manuscripts or copies don't have that additional ending. Therefore most scholars agree that it was added later by some copyist who didn't think fear and silence was a very effective conclusion to the story of Jesus. So he cleaned it up for Mark, took away the ambiguity and replaced it with a happy certainty. But Mark himself ended the Gospel with fear and silence.

Up to this point, the women had been some of Jesus' most faithful followers. When it started heating up, the other disciples of Jesus betrayed him, or denied him, or fled from his presence to save their own skins. But these women followed him all the way to the cross, and kept vigil at the crucifixion, praying and weeping. Later, they silently watched as Joseph of Arimathea courageously took the battered, bloody remains of Jesus down from the cross and wrapped it in a linen cloth. Pressed for time because of the onset of Sabbath rest, he placed the corpse in his family's

tomb. It was a hasty and incomplete burial.

Saturday was quiet. On that Sunday, just after sunrise when the Sabbath was over, these same women gathered the customary spices, and headed out for the cemetery. They wanted to complete the grim task and show their respects one more time.

As they walk, I doubt the women are saying very much. The shock, the grief, the cruelty of it all . . . it's all too fresh, too new. They're focusing on what lies ahead and what they need to do. And they're concerned about that massive stone, how they'll manage to move it away.

But I wonder if they didn't feel a little relief, as well. I wonder if it felt like a burden had been lifted from their shoulders. Let's be honest: following Jesus was no picnic. It had become harder and harder. Clearly it was dangerous. And he was always on the move; it was hard to keep up with him. And he was constantly questioning some of their fundamental assumptions in life. He was telling them to do crazy things: to bless those who curse you, to turn the other cheek to those who strike you, to love your enemies, to give your lives away in service of others, to be generous with your money, to befriend and speak up for those on the margins of society, to love the unlovable, to forgive those who sin against you in a 70 times 7 sort of way. Who could ever live up to such expectations?

Jesus had also been saying strange things, embarrassing things that you wouldn't want to have to repeat like, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life." He was also making big claims, dangerous claims: "Whoever lives and believes in me will never die." Who says things like that?

Don't get me wrong. Those women walking to his tomb surely loved Jesus, and had placed all their bets on him. But remember they're on their way to clean up his corpse, so I'm thinking there's some internal turmoil, spiritual turmoil. Somehow they got hooked in to this Jesus cult, but he's dead now, and maybe most of what he said is dead too. Maybe these women are thinking things will gradually go back to

the way they were before they had ever seen the world through Jesus' eyes? Maybe they could go back to life as it was before they met him? Just take care of this one last messy errand, and they'll mostly be off the discipleship hook. Perhaps there's a little relief mixed into their grief.

Is that the way this day will go for us? In just a little while, another Easter Sunday will have come and gone. We'll put the last dishes away, wipe down the counters, place the remains of the chocolate bunny somewhere out of sight, maybe watch a little T.V. before bed. Then we'll wake up to a Monday morning. With the expectations of Lent, Holy Week and Easter being over, we can all breathe a sigh of relief and return to some semblance of normalcy.

When the women arrive at the tomb, they discover the stone has been rolled away. Entering the tomb, they see a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe. The angel says to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he will meet you in Galilee, just as he told you."

We cannot blame the women for what happens next. It was all simply too much, too many changes and surprises and reversals in too short a time. And so fearfully they flee from the tomb and they say nothing to anyone. Fear and silence. Why does Mark end it this way?

I watched a movie the other night. It was a good movie. It had me hook, line and sinker. And when the credits started rolling I was surprised, first of all, because not everything had been resolved. And I was also a little disappointed. I wanted to know more. What happened to these characters I care about? Many movies today are based on the lives of real people. Afterwards, we rush to the internet to learn more and see what became of them.

I think that's what Mark is doing here. By ending with fear and silence, he's intentionally ending the story with suspense. Not everything has been resolved. He's telling his readers, "If you have grown to care about this Jesus and his

message and the disciples, go and check this out for yourself.” Learn more. What happened next? What did they do? What did they say? Does it seem credible? Or are they having fun seeing if they can start a new religion?

But I also think Mark is passing the torch to us. The male disciples are locked in a room for fear. The female disciples are on the run. That means it’s up to us now. The Lord is risen and we are the only ones left to spread the news. We cannot rely on Peter or Salome or the culture or anyone else. Because of *their* fear and silence, *we* are the ones called to speak.

Growing up, you heard the Easter message from someone, maybe a Sunday School teacher or parent or grandparent. My guess is death has silenced most of those voices. They are no longer active witnesses for you. That means you are the custodian of the message now. You can’t rely on previous generations anymore. Like it or not, they’ve passed the torch on to you, and future generations (your children and grandchildren) are spiritually dependent on you! Fear and silence are not an option.

But here’s the thing: in order to overcome the fear and the silence, we must first believe the Good News and apprehend it for ourselves. This isn’t just some intellectual assent to a doctrine or creed. It’s about trust . . . trust that because Jesus is risen, fear and death are not the end of his story nor the end of ours. God is not done with us. God is not done with this world. Jesus was not just raised as a past action, but Jesus *is* risen, remains risen. He’s on the loose in the world. He’s living and active in *our* time, in *our* history, in *our* lives. Things will never go back to old normal again.

If Jesus is alive, this fact changes us. We’ll still go to the same old job tomorrow, but if Jesus is alive that means all his promises are alive as well. If Christ is risen, then the cross is a victory, not a defeat. Then our sin really has been accounted for on the cross, for he was the Lamb of God sent to take away the sin of the world. If Christ is risen, then God has reconciled himself to you through his Son, and is no longer counting your sins against you. So you need not fear

God or try to keep him at arm's length. And you need not despair over your sin, or try to blame it on someone or something else. For God's forgiveness is stronger than your sin.

If Jesus is alive, it means all those counterintuitive commands are still in effect, like loving your enemies and serving others. If Jesus is alive, it also means he has defeated death not just for himself but for you. Remember, that's the promise! "He who believes in me will live, even though he dies!"

Paul explains this in 1 Corinthians 15. He says *our* resurrection is all wrapped up in the resurrection of Jesus. He explains we are so intrinsically connected to Jesus in Holy Baptism that we might say his resurrection and ours are actually the same event. He continues: "Christ has been raised from the dead, and is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." "Firstfruits" refers to the very first part of a harvest. But there is only one harvest. And there is only one resurrection. Jesus' resurrection is the firstfruits of ours. What then will death look like for us? There's always one last exhaled breath, right? But the next time we breathe in we will be with the Lord in heaven, without any awareness of the passage of time. So the promise is life is changed . . . not ended.

However, we need not wait until then before life changes. Let this message of Easter to change your life today. It means you don't need to fear the future because Christ is in the future. It means the past does not condemn you because Christ has redeemed the past. It means you can live more confidently and deliberately in the present, for there is one who is with you, loves you and will guide you.

I've grown to love Mark's ending. It just rings so real and so human. Clearly, Mark is in no mood to try to argue you into the faith. He's not going to try to pin you down with the evidence. Instead he faithfully passes on the central tenant of our faith: "Christ was crucified. Christ is risen!" There you have it. Now you are the custodians of the message. Do with it as you will. But know you cannot

rely on anyone else to get it to your children and grandchildren, or to your friends. No, the torch is in your hands now.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

**He is risen indeed! Alleluia!** No more fear. No more silence. Amen.

