

“Surprise Endings”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
April 1, 2018**

Old Testament lesson: Psalm 118:1, 21-24

New Testament lesson: Mark 16:1-8

In the Greek Orthodox tradition, believers gather the day after Easter to tell jokes. “Since the most extravagant ‘joke’ of all took place on Easter Sunday – (the surprising, unexpected) victory of Jesus over death – (they celebrate Easter) by sharing stories with unexpected endings, (humorous and joyous stories).¹

Today’s reading from the Gospel According to Mark has an unexpected ending. In fact, it has three unexpected endings. The first comes from the oldest manuscripts of Mark, which end with the two Marys and Salome having heard from the messenger of God that Jesus is risen, and they flee the tomb, “for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Years later, those distributing copies of Mark remembered that the three women got over their fear. As we heard in the Shorter Ending of Mark that I just read, “... All that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter.” It’s a little brighter ending, isn’t it? Others manuscripts expanded this ending to include Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene the very next day. But even in that ending when she tells the disciples about seeing the Risen Lord, they still do not believe her.

Despite all the assurances Jesus made while he was with them, that he would be raised up as Lord of All Creation, the disciples were expecting to find him in the tomb, dead and buried. No surprise ending.

In the grip of that fear and all the upset that came with it, they could not see the brighter future God had out ahead of them, a future in which God would use them to grow and spread the most amazing, caring, self-giving community of faith the world has ever seen.

In fact, they had about as much hope as a certain, lonely frog, desperate for any form of company. The frog telephoned a psychic hotline to find out what his future had in store.

¹ **Doris Donnelly, "Divine Folly: Being Religious and the Exercise of Humor," *Theology Today*, 48, 1992, 385-398.**

The psychic adviser told him, “You’re going to meet a beautiful young girl who will want to know everything about you.” The frog was thrilled and said, “This is great! Where will I meet her – at work, at a party?” “Nope,” said the psychic, “In a biology class.” Surprise ending.

The disciples had no hope of a surprise ending, no hope of ever seeing Jesus again. They expected to find nothing in that tomb but a dead end. And if it weren’t for the Risen Lord, that would be the end of the story, their story and our story – no hope, the world left to its own misguided ways, gripped by fear and suffering.

There would be no hope amid the senseless violence of our day; no assurance of peace among nations set for war; no place for those of different races, nationalities and sexual orientations; no forgiveness when we act contrary to Jesus’ teachings; no confidence that God will see us through our greatest struggles – whether they be illness, financial difficulties, troubling relationships, grief, loneliness and isolation. Thankfully, we do have hope! We know the surprise ending that Jesus pulled over on a world in desperate need of the ultimate source of joy and peace and hope.

Through any and all difficulties, God is with us, and in that, our hearts are light and full and joyous. Through Jesus Christ, God has defeated death, overcome temptation, loved the unlovable, raised up the downtrodden, cured the sick, won the battle, and assured peace the world over.

That we can’t always see the world Jesus is bringing into being is not the greatest crisis we could face. The greatest crisis faced by us and our world is not a lack of proof that Jesus lives and works in us and through us. It’s a lack of faith – surprising, unexpected even unreasonable faith that leads to surprising, unexpected, unreasonable actions, for the glory of God, the ministry of Jesus, the certainty of the Holy Spirit. Don’t let a lack of faith lead you to a dead end. No matter what is holding you back, there is a way forward, through faith.

Mark tells us that after the two Marys and Salome told the disciples that Jesus is risen, “Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” Jesus used even those fearful, uncertain, questioning, fallible disciples to spread from east to west a faith that cannot fail, has not failed, will not fail!

We may fail. We may fail to keep the faith as individuals, as families, as communities, even as a nation. It has happened before in other parts of the world -letting faith in Jesus and the church slip away.

It happens because being a part of a faith community like this one takes something of us, just like it took something of the earliest disciples to stand up to their ever-more complicated and disbelieving world.

When we let our faith in Jesus and the church slip away, we miss out on the blessings of God almighty, the ministry of Christ among us, the inspiration and power of the Holy Spirit, capable of doing in and through us the unimaginable – tearing down the barriers that hold us back and overcoming the doubts and fears that leave us powerless.

Don't let this world distract you or tempt you or misguide you so horribly that you lose touch with your community of faith. Don't allow that to happen. Instead, make a commitment right now to live into our shared faith. Claim for yourself and your loved ones the new life and new hope that belongs to you as a follower of Christ.

We can all do a little more to live out our faith – by giving of ourselves for others; by gathering as the community of faith for worship, fellowship and spiritual growth; by taking God's spirit into our hearts and letting it guide our words and actions – among our loved ones, in our workplaces and schools, with the strangers we meet in our communities or hear about from around the world.

Ours is a living faith! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And the more we let Jesus into our lives, the more God will be known and felt and shared. That my friends is our only sure hope that is the certainty of our faith. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we marvel at the mystery of Christ's resurrection.

We are awed by his commitment, astonished by the depth of his love for us, and amazed by the display of your power over the forces of sin and death. You are a God of wonders.

You restore that which has been lost, bring new life from that which is old, create beauty from sin and ugliness and offer healing and hope where there appears to be only sickness and death.

Your miraculous power continues to work in our lives and in our world.

Turn our hearts toward you and open our eyes that we may recognize your presence in every person, in every situation, in every place.

For it is in your name that we pray, raising our eyes to heaven and our voices to God in the Lord's Prayer as together we sing:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**