

“Angel Eyes”
Mark 16:1-8

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
April 4, 2021

After church last Sunday I got word that Betty Roe had died and I immediately called her husband, Bruce, and went to be with the family. During the visit, I saw in Bruce’s eyes the pain of this terrible loss – it was in his whole body, really. I opened my arms and we hugged.

I don’t know how long it had been since Bruce hugged someone from the church, but for me, that was my first church-member hug in over a year. And it was a deep, strong hug; not the quick guy-hug you normally see. Bruce held onto me for eight or ten beats; a great hug for both of us. Was Jesus a hugger? I bet he was. I bet Jesus was the best hugger ever, especially when you’re feeling alone and empty inside.

Can you image getting a hug from Jesus, how long it might last, the strength and comfort you’d feel? Now imagine walking alongside Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome heading toward the tomb of Jesus; imagine how empty you’d feel inside, in your heart.

“When the sabbath was over,” says Mark, the three of them “bought spices so that they might go and anoint (the body of Jesus),” so that they might ease that empty feeling through a sacred act of love and tenderness. The fragrant spices were bought in anticipation of the overwhelming, vile stench of death they feared would overtake their senses.

It’s unusual for us these days to face that stench of death. Instead, we entrust our loved ones to the funeral home, which tenderly and lovingly prepares the body to be as life-like as possible. But we know..., we know that the spark of life is gone and the scent of familiarity has been sterilized. Very sad.

And yet this day, today – for those three women and for us – this is different than any other day. This is Easter Sunday, a day of new and eternal life with the Lord, when the fragrant scent of heaven envelopes us all the way down here on earth. Easter moves us from a dead end to a new beginning!

Of course, for the three women going to the tomb, they couldn’t see that new beginning when they set out on their sad and solemn mission of mercy. They saw only obstacles – a heavy stone blocking their way. With worry etched on their faces, these women turned to one another and said, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?”

How will we get through this? We can relate to that. Take a moment right now and think of that thing you've been trying to get through, or that project or goal you've had out ahead of you but haven't been able to reach. Now, notice how long it takes before some obstacle or difficulty comes to mind. Almost immediately, right?

What if the women heading to the tomb had turned back – maybe to give up, maybe to get some help? Either way, their journey would have been sidetracked. Who knows how that would have gone?

Same with us. Whenever you give up on a goal or even just put it off for a “better time,” you're giving up on yourself, and you're giving up on God. God was at the tomb ready to meet the women, in the form of an angel. God was out ahead taking care of that obstacle, clearing the way from them. Because they moved forward in faith and with perseverance, they were met – not with an obstacle – but with a miracle, the stone was rolled away.

You, too, can choose to move forward in faith with perseverance toward whatever goal, project, hope or dream you have, confident that God is out ahead of you clearing the way for them.

Easter moves us from worry to wonder, from despair to hopefulness, counting on God to lead the way. Of course, how God guides us and leads us is often a mystery; sometimes we just have to be open to a new perspective. It's like the guy who absolutely hated his wife's cat and decided to get rid of it. He drove the cat 20 blocks from their house and left him at a park. As the man arrived home, the cat was walking up the driveway. The next day, the man drove the cat 40 blocks away, and put the whole thing behind him. Driving back up his driveway, there was the cat! The man kept taking the cat farther and farther away, yet the cat would always beat him home. Finally, the man decided to drive several miles away. He turned right, then left, past a bridge, and then took more turns until he reached what he thought was a safe distance from his home, and he left the cat there. Hours later, the man called his wife: “Jen, is the cat there?” “Yes,” the wife said. “Why do you ask?” Frustrated, the man said, “Put him on the phone. I'm lost, and I need directions!”

Entering the tomb of Jesus, the three women needed direction for their lives. And there in the tomb, and their sense of loss and loneliness God had sent – not a cat – but an angel. When they saw this heavenly figure “dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side,” Mark tells us, “...they were alarmed.” Where they expect to find only emptiness, God had sent an angel. Instead of leaving them to their grief, God soothes them with angelic words: “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.”

They expected to find Jesus in the place where they laid him, and instead they found an empty space. Sometimes that empty place, that empty feeling in our lives just means that fulfillment lies elsewhere. Have you ever felt all alone in life, empty inside? That feeling might be a sign, a sign that the fulness of life lies out ahead of you. Easter moves us from emptiness to fulfillment, if we are open to going where God would lead us.

The angel tells the women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that (Jesus) is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” The women had set off that morning on a mission, a mission to anoint the body of Jesus, to say goodbye one last time to their friend and teacher, to grieve the loss of Jesus and all the hope and promise he offers us. And in ministering to Jesus, they’re given a new mission.

The angel send them and all the disciples to Galilee, saying, “there you will see (Jesus), just as he told you.” Galilee was the mission field of the disciples. Just as Jesus meets them there, Jesus is out ahead of us too, in those places of ministry God has prepared for us.

After the tomb comes the resurrection! We, like the earliest disciples, have the Risen Lord to look forward to, in all the places we go. We, like all disciples of Jesus down through the centuries, have a new mission, a new calling to serve and follow the Risen Lord.

Easter moves us from uncertainty and doubt to ministry and faith, from the drudgery of life to the fulfillment of our calling as followers of Christ. Not that that’s easy. These three women and all disciples of Jesus have their good days and bad when it came to following Christ. Mark tells us plainly that the women “fled from the tomb (in) terror and amazement ..., and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

Sure they were afraid; sometimes we are afraid, afraid to step out in faith. But they didn’t let fear control their lives and neither should we. These amazing women overcame their fear and shared the good news of Jesus Christ with all who would listen. They went on to make those tough life choices that come with being a Christian. And they went on to receive the blessing of the Lord – in lives dedicated to serving others, gathering with fellow Christians, and worshiping Jesus as our Lord and Savior.

Easter moves us from doubt to faith, from drudgery to calling, from worry to wonder, despair to hope, dead ends to new beginnings.

This is the day we claim that truth for ourselves and our families, for our church and our community, as we seek to join God at work out ahead of us, shining light upon the path of those who sit in darkness. This is Easter Sunday, the day we are empowered and sent to make the name of Jesus, the spirit of the Lord, and the glory of God known the world over. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

We gather, O God, in your presence to rejoice in the light of the empty tomb. The stone has been rolled away, both from the mouth of the tomb and from the depths of our hearts. We have learned to live in the power of the risen Christ. We have grown daily in the presence of our risen Savior.

Some, however, have joined us today after a long winter of the soul. We have struggled to breathe in the chill wind of adversity. We have been unable to grow anything in the barren fields of doubt and fear. We have trembled and shivered as we have struggled to sense the warmth of your love.

We come to the empty tomb with an expectant hope in our hearts and the prayer of faith on our lips. We are confident that you are about to do a new thing, O God. We believe that the stone, which we struggle to move ourselves, is about to be blown out of its ruts.

Remove, we pray, the heaviness of grief from those suffering loss in any way, and particularly the loss of loved ones. We pray that you, O Lord, would continue to meet those battling cancer and other diseases with your resurrection hope of health and wholeness and a peace that abideth.

We pray all this in anticipation and faith in the Risen Lord, and to that end we bow in worship, and worship in wonder, and wonder in faith, faith in our Jesus Christ, who taught us to prayer together saying:

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.