

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
March 31, 2024

Just As He Told You

Mark 16:1-8

Nothing about Easter came as a surprise to Jesus. As he had predicted his suffering and death, so he had also promised his resurrection. Two Sundays ago, we were listening to him tell his disciples “that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again” (Mark 8:31). He repeats this promise two more times in Mark’s Gospel. So it’s not as if Jesus’ resurrection should come as a complete surprise to his followers.

And yet, according to the end of Mark’s Gospel, it does. The women who have come to the tomb, witnessed it empty, and encountered a heavenly messenger, turn and flee. Words fail. Panic sets in. The last image we have is of the women grabbing the bottom of their dresses so they don’t trip over them as they run from the tomb. The screen goes dark, and then the credits roll.

The way that Mark ends his Gospel has always been a puzzler, especially compared to the ways that the other three Gospels conclude. In those, Jesus appears to his disciples, talks to Mary Magdalene, meets a couple of followers on the road to Emmaus, shares a breakfast of fish on the beach. But in Mark, we’re left with a more ragged finale. Maybe, as many have argued, this is Mark’s way of inviting us to continue the story through our participation in the ongoing mission of Jesus. The fact that we’re here today, gathered in Bryans Road, to meet our risen Lord, is solid confirmation that the story didn’t end at the tomb in Jerusalem.

Plus, we can safely assume that the people to whom Mark was writing probably knew about other parts of the story, such as a resurrection appearance, the missionary activity of his disciples, and Jesus’ promise to come again. In fact, their community of believers, brought into existence by the spread of the gospel, was itself evidence that Jesus’ promises were true. They could rely on his word. What he said would happen had happened. He had said that after three days he would rise again. Promise made, promise kept.

Writer and theologian Lewis Smedes says:

Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then *you are like God*.¹

When you’re faithful to the promises you have made, you reflect the character of God, whose faithfulness is revealed in Jesus Christ. I think of Paul’s affirmation in one of his letters to the Corinthians, where says, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’ in Christ” (2 Cor. 1:20). God’s word is reliable. He called Abraham and told him that through him he would bless all nations on earth (Gen. 12:3). Across time, in his

journey with his people Israel, God was faithful to his word, and in the person of Jesus Christ God fulfilled his promise by sending a Savior. So promise making and promise keeping are at the heart of who God is and what God is doing in the world and in our lives. And Easter is the supreme and most decisive act of God's faithfulness to humankind.

Christian recording artist Carolyn Arends recalls a jubilant Easter service where her church's pastor said something that "stopped me in my mental tracks." He said, "The world offers promises full of emptiness. But Easter offers emptiness full of promise." Arends goes on to say:

Empty cross, empty tomb, empty grave-clothes ... all full of promise. If I were writing the Easter story, I don't think I'd choose emptiness as my symbolic gesture....

What is it about God that makes him so favor this kind of paradox? I guess this is what we should expect from the Servant King—the God who decided that the best way to save the world was to let it kill him. I don't understand the way God thinks. But on those days when I feel hollowed out and broken—half-dead, even—it makes me glad to remember that for Easter people, even death is full of promise.²

The empty tomb signals a promise fulfilled. Jesus had told his disciples that he would be raised. But the empty tomb also signals a promise still unfolding. His mission of the kingdom of God continues. And Jesus refuses to carry forward this mission without his disciples. The messenger at the tomb says to the women, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you'" (v. 7).

"Just as he told you." Those are words of promise. Words to individuals who had failed to live up to their own promises, especially Peter. "Even if all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29). "Even if I have to die with you, I never will disown you." And all the others said the same" (14:31). Promises made, promises not kept. When the hostility that eventually killed Jesus came to threaten the disciples in various ways, they abandoned him, denied him, and fled. But he overcame their failure by fulfilling his own promise. He had said, "But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee" (14: 28). Lo and behold, he now has.

Why Galilee? Because that's where Jesus had begun his mission. That's where they had experienced the fullness of kingdom life within Jesus' ministry. That's where the mission to the nations was launched. And that's the place from which the disciples and the women came. Galilee was their home turf, the place of their daily activity and routine. After their years of being with Jesus, when his followers thought of Galilee, they didn't think of rest and relaxation. They thought of mission and ministry. They thought of the kingdom of God on the move.

So for the risen Jesus to meet them in Galilee must mean that the work of the reign of God wasn't done. But how could they still be part of it, after all their fear, failure, and flight? Would this reunion in Galilee be Jesus' opportunity to rebuke them and disown them for good? Was he gathering them in order to pronounce final judgment on their disloyalty? What would await them when they came face to face with Jesus?

What was waiting for them was forgiveness. Rather than rejection, they got reconciliation. Jesus doesn't tell them that they've returned to Galilee so he can do a historical rewind. His plan isn't to go back to where it all began, and this time pick some new disciples who will prove more faithful, more reliable, and more teachable. His resurrection doesn't mean that he's taking this cosmic project called the reign of God and starting it all over. Instead, it means that Jesus is redeeming his disciples' past and opening the door to their future, and

the world's future. This is the kind of God who raised Jesus from the dead and is making all things new through him. As Lewis Smedes says, "God offers two answers to our deepest anxieties. He is a forgiving God who recreates our pasts by forgiving them. He is a promising God who controls our future by making and keeping promises. By forgiving us, he changes our past. By promising, he secures our future."³

Indeed, the future is where we see Jesus going in today's text. In one respect, that's where he's always been in relation to his disciples. When Jesus first called them, he summoned them to "follow me." The Greek term means to go or come "after" him or "behind" him. So from the beginning, the proper place for a disciple is behind Jesus, or after him. Jesus is out ahead of them, even when they're not able to see him. So one preacher has captured it when she says, "If Jesus goes ahead of us in death, can there be any doubt that he will be there ahead of us wherever life might take us?"⁴

Continuing the Easter story requires that we go forward. According to Mark, those who want to park themselves in the present and spend most of their time hanging out at the empty tomb will miss the fullness and depth of Easter. That's because Jesus is already out front, occupying the future. He isn't locked way back there in the past, hoping you'll come and meet him on the dusty roads of first century Palestine. He isn't hovering over and around us in the here and now, just peeking in on us from time to time. No, if we are to meet Jesus and know Jesus, then we'll have to get up and go forward. Go forward as individuals and go forward as a church. That's because the place where we will see Jesus is in the fulfillment of his promises.

College basketball fans, including myself, are currently enjoying the excitement of March Madness. Pastor John Onwuchekwa tells about an experience he had a few years ago when Baylor was playing Gonzaga in the national championship game. Onwuchekwa, who was rooting for Baylor, was texting friends while watching the broadcast. At one point, Baylor took out one of its star players and Gonzaga began to make a run. Onwuchekwa was infuriated, and told the group chat he couldn't believe they did that. He was certain things would turn out bad, until one of his friends asked him what he was talking about. The player was already back in the game. That's when Onwuchekwa realized there was a lag in his internet connection. As the game went on, the lag started to get worse. The announcer's voice would be on the screen, saying a player made the shot, but on Onwuchekwa's screen, the player was still dribbling. But then he would make the shot. What Onwuchekwa was seeing on the screen was behind what had already happened on the court.

What's even more interesting is that Onwuchekwa decided not to log out and then log back in to try and fix it. Instead, he chose to let it stay there, because he trusted the announcer's voice. He knew he wasn't going to lie. He knew that the announcer's voice preceded what would happen, so he let him speak, and then he waited. It was an interesting case of a word from the future coming into the present, enabling Onwuchekwa to wait his way forward.⁵

I believe that's the way it is with Jesus' promises to us. His word comes to us from one who is out ahead of us, already occupying the future which he has made possible for us through his death and resurrection. Jesus continues the work of God's kingdom, and calls us forward to participate, usually in our own Galilee, our home turf, the place of our own daily activity and routine, among the people with whom we share life. No matter your sins and your shortcomings, your fears and your flight, his promises are trustworthy and true. Though we fail, his word does not. His word is what will last. His word is what takes our denials and defeats, and turns them into a new way forward. As Phillips Brooks said, "You

must learn, you must let God teach you, that the only way to get rid of your past is to make a future out of it. God will waste nothing.”⁶

“He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” Just as he told you. These are words of promise. His promise to meet us. His promise to be with us. His promise to lead us. His promise to restore us. His promise to return to us. His promise to raise us. His promise to make all things new. His promise, “Because I live, you will live also” (John 14:19).

¹ Lewis B. Smedes, “The Power of Promises.” In *A Chorus of Witnesses: Model Sermons for Today’s Preacher*, ed. Thomas G. Long and Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 156.

² Carolyn Arends, “What’s So Good About Good Friday?” *Today’s Christian Woman*. April 10, 2009. <https://www.todayschristianwoman.com/articles/2009/march/whatssogoodaboutgoodfriday.html> (March 27, 2024).

³ Lewis B. Smedes, “Forgiveness—The Power to Change the Past.” *Christianity Today*. December 1, 2002. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2002/decemberweb-only/12-16-55.0.html> (March 27, 2024).

⁴ Sally Bates, “Fill in the Words: Mark 16:1–8,” an unpublished sermon preached on March 31, 2002. Quoted in Audrey West, *Commentary on Mark 16:1–8*. *Working Preacher*. March 31, 2024. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord-2/commentary-on-mark-161-8-9> (March 28, 2024).

⁵ John Onwuchekwa, “God’s People Are a Waiting People.” A sermon on TGC Podcast. October 22, 2021. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/podcasts/tgc-podcast/gods-people-are-waiting-people/> (March 28, 2024).

⁶ Quoted in Heirlooms, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41. No. 7.