

“Hope Over Fear”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – April 4, 2021

Mark 16: 1-8

As I’ve been journeying through Holy Week this week, I couldn’t help but remember what we were living through at this time last year. Do you remember?

(1) We were being told to stay at home, to not congregate with others, to constantly wash our hands, so that we might remain safe from an unknown virus. (2) The Session made the decision to cancel all in-person worship and activities, and so our Palm Sunday celebration was altered to picking up palm fronds at the door of the building. (3 & 4) We figured out quickly how to worship in a very different way – with four of us in the sanctuary, and many, many more joining us online. Lisa and I sat in front of a camera, Jeff Gillespie played the organ and piano, and Jon Barnhouse was the Wizard of Oz behind the scenes, making sure we broadcast to all of you on Facebook. (5) Maundy Thursday and Good Friday were virtual services, where we remembered Jesus’ act of washing the disciples’ feet, instituting the Lord’s Supper, and suffering his death on the cross. (6) Our Easter Vigil was symbolized by the luminaries many of you took and placed on your doorstep the night before Easter, shining a light of hope into the darkness that our world was experiencing – hope that would overcome fear.

Last year was so difficult, so strange, such a different Holy Week to live through as people of faith. We weren’t together for our normal gatherings and practices of faith. We had to improvise and adapt and find other ways to walk this road together. Our world was overcome with fear – fear of uncertainty, fear of death and illness, fear of our lives being altered in unimaginable ways. Yet through it all, we believed that God was with us and would overcome our fear with resurrection hope.

After what we experienced last year, I am filled with gratitude and humility that we are in this place this morning, and we can celebrate Christ’s resurrection both in-person and online. I am grateful that we have been willing to sacrifice certain things so that we can be here together, recognizing that the health of our fellow sister or brother in Christ outweighs our sadness at not singing, or our frustration with having to continue wearing a mask. I am grateful that so many are getting vaccinated, and that allows us to safely gather with family and friends in ways that were taken away from us one year ago. While we are not at the end of this pandemic yet, I am grateful that we are so much closer than we were a year ago, and that there continue to be signs of hope for the future.

If we are being honest and transparent, though, the last year has also been filled with fear over things besides the pandemic. Racial and social unrest brought us face-to-face with the deep divides that exist in our society, and how we must address them head-on if we are overcome our fear of the other. A divisive election and assault on the United States Capitol shook us to our core, as we struggled to know how our country’s foundational democratic principles

would survive. Natural disasters, human catastrophes of gun violence, individuals experiencing grief and loss of all kinds – fear was an overriding feeling and reaction for the last twelve months, to be sure.

Perhaps it's only appropriate then that we read Mark's account of Easter morning this year. I've always felt that Mark's account of Easter is the most honestly human of the four gospels. In Matthew, Luke, and John, we have the risen Christ either greeting the women or disciples in the garden or on the Road to Emmaus. In Mark's account, we barely are given any details, and never have evidence of the risen Christ. Mark spends 119 verses on Jesus' passion and death, and only eight verses on his resurrection. And Mark concludes by stating: "and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That first Easter was not only filled with amazement and uncertainty, it was also filled with fear and terror. Perhaps this year, more than ever, we need to hear how God overcame fear as others bore witness to what they had seen that Easter morning.

As with all the other gospel accounts of Easter, it is the women who first receive the news that Jesus has been raised. In Mark, we read that "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint (Jesus)" (16:1). As they went to the tomb, though, we can tell that anxiety and concern are present with the women: "They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'" (16:3). They were filled with uncertainty as they approached the final resting place of their Lord.

Their uncertainty turned to shock when they reached the tomb. The very large stone had already been rolled away, and the tomb was open. They hesitantly went inside the tomb, and what they found was even more alarming: "They saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed" (16:5). I can only begin to imagine what must have been going through their minds at that point. "Where was Jesus? Had someone stolen the body? Who was this man sitting inside the tomb? Had he rolled the stone away? What's going on here?"

If the other gospels share the joy and happiness about Easter, Mark shares the stark, genuine, human emotions in response to this new reality. Mark doesn't sugar-coat it - it is natural for us to respond to the resurrection with fear, with shock, with uncertainty, with doubt, with alarm. We struggle, as the women did, to comprehend what is happening. We need explanations, visual aids, logic – anything to help us make right what seems to be totally out of place. If the body is not here, then where is it? What does that mean? If we stop and really think about it, this day can actually be quite terrifying.

Yet even in our fear, our shock, our anxiety, God does not abandon us. God's messenger knows the women are alarmed, even without them saying a word. And so, he assuages their fears by first, acknowledging their fear: "Do not be alarmed;" second, recognizing why they have come: "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified;" third, explaining why he is not there: "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him;" and finally, giving them direction out of their fear: "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” (16:6-7).

Of course, the women still struggle with all of this, and the verbs and adjectives used by Mark reflect this struggle. The women “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). I would argue that the church struggled with this way of ending Mark’s Easter account. If you look in your bibles, you will find a shorter and longer ending to Mark, likely written some three hundred years after the original ending at verse 8. I’m sure others felt like the culmination of the Christian faith could not end with, “and they were afraid.”

Martha Spong is a UCC pastor, and she writes the following: *Stopping at verse 8 leaves us all in an uncomfortable situation. We crave the resolution the additional verses bring. It’s a day when we really want to offer a few “Alleluias” and “He is risens” and let the trumpets and the choir take care of the rest . . . [Mark’s account] leaves us mostly with questions. Why preach it? I chose to because I find the discomfort compelling . . .*

With their horror and bereavement still fresh, (the women) hear the kind of news we might fantasize about getting after a loved one dies – and they were afraid. Their fear reminds us that the good news of Christ’s resurrection is not simply reliable news to be taken for granted. It is a truth so shocking that even the first people to hear it, people who hear it on the spot where it happened, cannot imagine how to tell anyone else . . .

Their story allows us to stand in their place, with our doubts and our questions and even our hopes. It offers an opportunity to talk about our own disbelief without rushing straight to the celebration. It reminds us that even when it’s hard to believe, there is no good news unless someone shares it (*Christian Century*, April 1, 2015: 18).

It is okay to have some healthy fear on Easter. That grounds our faith in the reality that what happens today is shocking, is hard-to-believe, is life-altering. A little disbelief helps us acknowledge that our future is not fully known, but it is guided by God’s light of hope. A little fear on Easter helps us be honest with others, and then realize that God stays with us, does not abandon us, and moves us forward from fear into faith.

As I reflect on all we have lived through over the last year, I am deeply aware that we have both been severely disconnected from one another, and we have found new ways to stay connected. For those who have not been able to be here for things in-person, it has felt isolating and full of grief, for you feel like you have missed out on so many things, almost like living in a prison with limited human contact. Or, you have become adept and accustomed to our virtual ways of gathering – on Facebook, on Zoom, on the telephone – that when there is an opportunity for you to participate in-person, it feels like a totally new experience, which very well may cause anxiety and fear.

I also realize that others of us have grown to appreciate new ways we’ve sought to remain connected, which has helped overcome our fear with hope and joy. We’ve learned that seeing and talking to someone on a screen, while not ideal, is better than not talking to them at all. We’ve adjusted our expectations

for what it means to be “the church” during this time, and perhaps that has given us new insights for ministry in our future. We have intentionally reached out to those who are homebound or isolated, and heard from them what peace and comfort it brought them to know they were not forgotten. Hope continues to overcome fear.

With our announcement that Debbie and I will be moving next month to North Carolina, I have sensed that disconnect and fear coming together – how hard it has been to receive this news while many of you have not been able to see me or others in-person. There’s also been fear about the church’s future and how things will proceed after I am gone. It’s okay to have a little healthy fear, for just like today, that grounds us and helps us rely on God as we move forward through a future that is not fully known – but is fully in the hands of our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

One thing I would like to offer over the next six weeks is a chance for us to bridge the disconnect we may be feeling about my leaving. I would like to invite you to what I’m calling “Connecting Times” – conversations that will happen both in-person and on Zoom – that we can have together about our decision to accept a new call, to reflect on what God has done through our shared ministry these last eighteen years, and to look ahead with hope to a future that is fully in God’s hands. These conversations will also be guided by scripture, and I’ll be sharing when they’ll take place later this week. My hope is that this will be a chance for us to allow God’s resurrection hope to overcome our fear, and to help us bear witness as disciples of the risen Christ.

The other thing I will share is that the mission of the church will continue long after I have left as your pastor, and there are signs of that hope all around. The Session will be meeting tomorrow night to approve the members of the church who will serve as the interim pastor search committee, and they will begin that important work in partnership with Whitewater Valley Presbytery. Last month, the Session approved using funds from the New Fund for Ministry to refresh and update our church’s website, something that is over ten years old and now, more than ever, is such a crucial evangelism tool to invite people to share in our ministry. It is hoped that will be up and running in May. In two weeks, we will have the great joy of hosting the ordination service for Jillian Flynn, a child of this church who will now be ordained for a lifetime of service as a minister of the Word and Sacrament in the PC(USA) – a first for our congregation. Look around you and witness the signs of resurrection hope and new life that are permeating our church’s ministry – they are unmistakable, they are energizing and amazing, and they are evidence to our world that God is alive this day.

“He has been raised; he is not here.” It’s okay if that statement causes you a little fear. Just don’t allow fear to paralyze you. Because today, hope overcomes fear at the empty tomb. Let us bear witness to that hope as we leave here, telling all who would hear: “He has been raised; he is not here.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.