

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

Easter Sunday  
Year A

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Text: Mark 16:1-8

Title: "24 Hours That Changed the World: Christ the Victor!"

I'm guessing that none of the children who excitedly search for Easter baskets on Easter morning would be very happy if they found an empty basket. We prefer it when things are full, especially things like Easter baskets.

If we were to take a poll and ask people, "which would you rather have: full or empty", it's probably a safe bet to suggest that most people would probably say they'd rather have full than empty.

When we purchase a cup of coffee for the road, we aren't looking for an empty cup. For church folks we'd rather have a full church than an empty one.

In a marriage we'd rather have a relationship full of laughter and love rather than one that is staid and devoid of joy.

Rather have a full stomach than an empty one

A full bank account rather than a zero balance.

Cupboards with plenty of food rather than Mother Hubbard's bare shelves.

And how about gas tanks? Some folks get quite anxious when the gauge dips below a quarter of a tank and begin to pester the driver until it's refilled again which can lead to heated discussions. Am I right?

In most things in life, we prefer full to empty, but listen to the Gospel According to Mark tell the story of Easter morning:

16 When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "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. 7 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.” 8 So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. (Mark 16:1-8)

In all of the Gospel accounts of Easter morning the consistent elements in all of them are that women were the first to the tomb and that the tomb was empty. In Matthew’s account only the two Mary’s make their way to the tomb. When they arrive at the tomb there is an earthquake and an angel rolls away the stone and nothing is mentioned about any spices.

In Luke’s account there are spices and ointments, but all the names and number of women are not shared and the stone has already been rolled away when they arrive. After they entered the tomb and found no body, “Two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them” and give them the message reminding them of what Jesus had said earlier about being handed over to sinners for crucifixion and then raised on the third day.

In that beautiful account in John’s Gospel, it’s Mary Magdalene alone who comes to the tomb first without mention of her carrying any spices. When she finds the stone removed from the tomb entrance, she runs to Peter and the disciple Jesus loved to give them the news. She doesn’t even look into the tomb until after Peter and John left.

Mark’s account is very different. Three women are named: Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome. Spices have been brought and along the way they are concerned about the huge stone that will have to be moved once they get there. When they do arrive, they find the work has already been done for them. No need for them to call anyone to help get it done. The three of them crowd into the dank, stone cave of a tomb and find someone sitting there, a young man who tells them that “...He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee...” And the women get out of there as fast as they could. They are so shaken by the experience, they say nothing to no one.

In my study Bible there’s two footnotes that read:

1. [Mark 16:8](#) Some of the most ancient authorities bring the book to a close at the end of verse 8. One authority concludes the book with the shorter ending; others include the shorter ending and then continue with verses 9–20. In most authorities verses 9–20 follow immediately after verse 8, though in some of these authorities the passage is marked as being doubtful.
2. [Mark 16:8](#) Other ancient authorities add *Amen*

Can you imagine reading this for the first time and being left with women running from the tomb so afraid they don’t say anything? They arrive thinking there will be a body. The tomb will be full as death always leaves a tomb, but what they find is empty and empty is not what is expected.

What led to this empty tomb was Jesus facing the evil of human cruelty, the evil embodied in the voices of religious people and political people. What Jesus faced down and

revealed was the evidence of human sin--separation from God--that leads to human beings treating other human beings in ways that reveal the cruelty of which we are all capable when left to our own devices, when we forget or ignore the central place of the love of God in our lives and seek our own self-centered ways, when we forget Jesus' greatest commandments to love God and neighbor—even if they are an enemy. Jesus allowed himself to receive the results of what ignoring the ways of God looks like when unleashed on a person. Jesus allowed himself to die which then led him to a tomb.

What has struck me most through this series this year for some reason is that Jesus was entirely alone in this experience of suffering. There was no one to rescue him. No one stood up for him. No one spoke up for him. No ACLU lawyers to take his case to the Supreme Court. Two of his friends denied or betrayed him, and the rest ran away and hid themselves. Even from the cross, Matthew says he shouted: “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani” which means “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” Jesus was entirely alone in his death. At least, it seems he felt entirely alone.

Now these three women come after it's over with the pain and shock of loss weighing on them as it did his other followers. It's the kind of pain that comes, as Adam Hamilton suggests, “...the day after a spouse walks out, leaving your life, your future, your hopes and your heart in tatters. It is the day after the lawsuit is filed against you and the day after the verdict. It is the day after 9/11, the day the news is still sinking in and you realize your life will change forever. It is the day the world seems so dark that hope is nowhere to be found” (p. 119, 24 Hours That Changed The World). These women come weighed down by the shock of what has happened expecting to find a tomb with a body, which is the normal course of things in life and death. What they find is an empty tomb and a young man with a message: “He has been raised; he is not here. ... go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee....” And it all is so out of the ordinary, so beyond their comprehension, that it terrifies them and they run away and keep their mouths shut.

Left with just an empty tomb, would you believe? Would you believe that God is capable of bringing life out of death? Would you believe that Jesus who taught a way of life based on love of God and neighbor prevailed over the force of angry hatred that results in taking life? Would you believe the One willingly and openly sat down for dinner with people others thought were drunkards and prostitutes, that he prevailed over those who condemned him for it? Would you believe the One who embraced those same so-called sinners and invited them to share in his ministry actually lived to continue that same incredible life-giving and life-transforming work through those he called to carry on? Would you believe if faced with a rolled away stone and empty-cave-of-a-tomb the One who told the story about a father who had two sons one of whom ran away the other who stayed and yet the father continued to love the runaway: that this storyteller's amazing grace would live beyond death? Would you believe that the message he shared which expressed the fact that who God is is completely countercultural; that his message continues to be true because he lives still?

Now there are a lot of things I don't understand in this world. I enjoy and appreciate scientific discovery but I've read some of Stephen Hawking's work and I just don't understand much of high level physics. I don't know how big the universe is or where it ends and while I believe and trust that all we see is matter than cannot be destroyed only changed, I do not really know at the molecular level how things work. There is a lot I do not understand.

The same is true of the resurrection. I don't understand the how. I only trust the why and

the Who. Christ lives because God lives and God's power—God's love—will outlast any crucifixion or MOAB or terrorist threat or any other dark day we experience in our lives. Christ is the victor because God's kingdom overpowers any other kingdom, any other force of violence, even the force of death itself which we human beings seem to think is the ultimate power. Easter says otherwise. Easter shouts out that the power of the Risen Christ means that emptiness doesn't always mean there is no life. In the case of Jesus' empty tomb, it's a sign that he still lives.

There is a passage in the letter to the Philippians that has been called the Christ Hymn. It goes like this:

<sup>5</sup> Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

<sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God,  
did not regard equality with God  
as something to be exploited,

<sup>7</sup> but emptied himself,  
taking the form of a slave,  
being born in human likeness.

And being found in human form,

<sup>8</sup> he humbled himself  
and became obedient to the point of death—  
even death on a cross.

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God also highly exalted him  
and gave him the name  
that is above every name,

<sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus  
every knee should bend,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,

<sup>11</sup> and every tongue should confess  
that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

In God's kingdom emptiness doesn't mean there is no life. It is not, in fact, the opposite of fullness. As with so much of God's kingdom ways, an empty tomb expresses the reality of resurrection life. As our Bishop David Bard wrote in his recent email:

*Resurrection hope and joy are not a denial of difficulty, but rather trust the God of Jesus Christ and the power of God's love to work with and through difficulty. God's love is the power of new life. God's love is stronger than death. As the sun rises ... [this] Easter morning in your home, at your church, no matter what may be going on in our world or your life, may hope and joy rise within you. And just as Mary [in John's Gospel] was surprised to see the risen Jesus, thinking*

*him the gardener, so may you find the risen Christ in surprising places.*

Amen.

If you're looking for proof of the resurrection, you need look only toward those who continue to sense Christ's presence in this life calling them to follow. This morning we have the joy and privilege of witnessing the gift of 4 people who have experienced Christ calling them to follow as they have made a decision for Christ. Pastor Jaye and I have spent time with these folks over the last 7 weeks studying "A Disciple's Path" which focuses on the vows of becoming a follower of Christ in the UMC. ....