

Easter Vigil – 2024

Mark 16

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Francis Episcopal Church March 30, 2024

I will forever be indebted to Pastor Edward Dufresne, a dear friend to so many of us, for helping me to better understand the strange way the Easter story ends in Mark's Gospel... Listen again as I read the last verse as it appears in the oldest manuscript we have of Mark's Gospel narrative....

(This last verse of course, following the alarming experience Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James had upon entering the empty tomb, and encountering the man in the white robe who told them Jesus had been raised and had gone before them into Galilee...)

The last verse reading like this... "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, **and yet...**" Here ends the reading... Here ends the Gospel... with these words, "**and yet**"...

As Pastor Edward Dufresne said of that "non-ending" to the Easter story in one of his Easter sermons, the incompleteness of it makes it a story that is meant to be continued... Indeed, as Edward said in his sermon, the ancient Easter greeting is not, "Christ once rose from the dead," but "Christ is risen... Christ is risen now in our own hearts and lives"... Meaning this story of liberation and blessing and joy is meant to continue with us, as we write the story's next chapter with our lives...

And then as a beautiful illustration of what this "story to be continued" means, Edward continued his sermon by telling a story

about the great composer Puccini, who died before completing his opera “Turandot”... his friends carefully and lovingly finishing it after Puccini’s death, using the notes he left behind...

“While conducting the premier performance of the opera,” said Edward, “Arturo Toscanini came to a certain point in the score, put down his baton, turned to the audience and said with emotion, ‘This is where the master ends.’ Then he lifted his baton and, before giving the downbeat said, ‘This is where his friends continue.’”

“So too,” Edward said in his sermon, “Mark’s triumphant Easter account is not concluded in his Gospel... it is continued by us as Jesus’ friends and followers”.... Meaning you and me... each of us called to speak the good news of the love that is stronger than death in our desperate, struggling, suffering world...

I have thought a good deal about the strange ending to Mark’s Gospel... the “and yet” that invites and calls us to continue the story of Easter by bearing witness to the presence of God’s love rising in the here and now of our own lives... But I have come to see that the “and yet” is not only the **invitation** to continue the telling of the story, but the very **reason** for doing so, as the “and yet” of God’s love is the hope that runs like a thread through the entire Bible, as evidenced by the many “and yet” we’ve heard read tonight... Listen...

In the beginning there was only darkness and nothingness... **and yet**, God’s spirit moved over the chaos and darkness to bring light and life...

In the waters of the flood, it looked like everything was lost... **and yet**, the green branch carried to Noah by the dove and the rainbow in the sky said otherwise...

The People of Israel suffered under the yoke of Egyptian bondage for generations... **and yet** the God of their ancestors would neither forget or forsake them, liberating them for the sake of the blessing first spoken to Abraham...

The valley was full of dry bones... **and yet**, by the power of God's spirit, God's breath, those bones came to life, transforming the valley of dry bones into a valley of dancing and delight...

Rome crucified Jesus in an attempt to stop his trouble-making work on behalf of love... **any yet**, that love was scattered in a thousand directions as Jesus stretched out his arms on the cross to embrace the entire world...

Rome thought they had buried Jesus in a grave, never more to be seen... **and yet**, it was more like he was planted like a seed, ready to burst forth into the world like milkweed seeds carried on the wind...

The stone had been placed in front of the tomb to seal it shut... **and yet**, when Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome went to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body (dis-spirited and fearful as they were), they found the stone had been rolled away...

The women were alarmed when a young man dressed in white told them Jesus that he had been raised, and wasn't there... **and yet**, the promise was that he had gone ahead of them and would see them in Galilee...

Do you see how the "and yet" of the story of God means there is an openness to the story no one can close forever? Do you see how, by the power of this love, the story speaks a promise of life and hope in the times and places in which we live as well?

And what of us, dear friends?

Many of us may come, even on this Easter Eve, feeling that there is no hope to be seen anywhere anymore... **and yet**, even in the midst of death and despair our faith assures us that nothing can separate us from the love of God... A promise most beautifully spoken of in the 8th chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans as he writes, *"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus."*

Many of us may come this evening fearful and dis-spirited by many things in our world, in our families, in our own hearts and souls... **and yet**, as our faith assures us, the risen Jesus calls us each by name, speaking a word of unconditional love, and inviting us to keep our eyes

and our hearts open for signs of him and the love he continues to make manifest in our world....

Many of us may come wondering if the good news of Easter is for us, given the mistakes we've made, the regrets we carry, the fears that hold us in bondage... **and yet**, in just a few moments we will each receive into our open hands the living bread of heaven, the body of Jesus, broken and shared with each of us... a gift of unconditional love given for you and for me... the real presence of the crucified and risen Jesus given for our taking and receiving and conceiving and sharing with the world out there...

The great Easter **"and yet"** of God made known in the person of Jesus, who is even now is waiting to rise again and again in the midst of our broken and beautiful lives... waiting to rise again and again in acts of love and compassion and justice and mercy... little acts of Easter waiting to be made manifest through our hands, our lives, our voices as we continue the Easter story left for us to continue...

The last words of Mark's Gospel, **"and yet,"** calling us to carry into our Good Friday world the **"and yet"** of God's love... the love that is moving in the dark even now, waiting for us to **see** its rising... waiting for us to **be** its rising... Waiting for us to bear witness in our words and deeds the truth of Love's **"and yet"** so others may know the power of that love in their own lives...

It is indeed a Good Friday world in which we live, dear friends... and sometimes it feels as if death has had the last word... **And yet...** And yet, we gather this evening to say death **has not** and **will not ever** have the last word. Because death could not hold Jesus, and death

cannot hold love... and because even now that love is rising and waiting for us to continue the story...

In the name of the one who teaches us how +, let us go from this place bearing the “and yet” of God’s love as if the world depended upon it. Because it does...