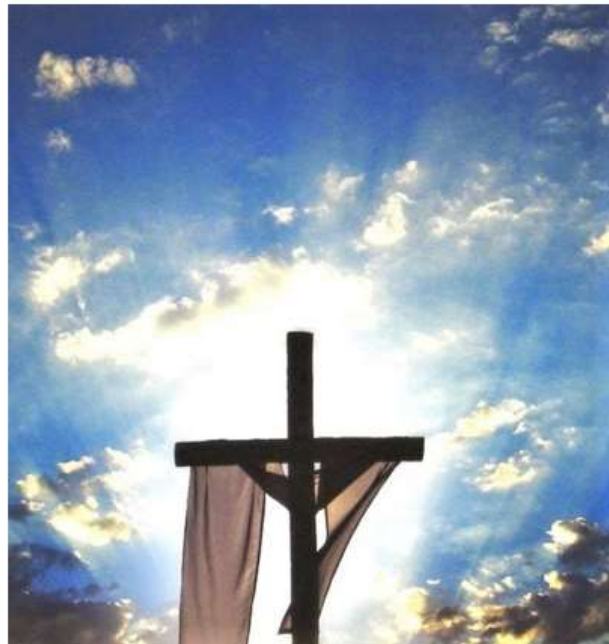

EASTER DAY: An Invitation to the Future

**West Epping Uniting Church
Easter Sunday – 1st April 2018
Mark 16:1-8**

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I must admit that I worry a lot. Am I doing the right thing? Should I have made that particular decision? What are the consequences of doing this and not doing that? Am I being faithful to my calling as disciple of Jesus? Am I offering this congregation the kind of leadership it really needs?

Such things play on my mind. They clutter my thinking and unnerve me at times. The evenings are the worst and it can be hard to get to sleep. I am sure many of you know what I am talking about because you, too, carry or have carried, responsibilities as managers, teachers, engineers, tradies, health professionals, carers and parents.

With so many things rattling around in my head, I find the early mornings quite refreshing. It's normal for me to rise before 5am most days to work in my study. Here I find the energy and the clarity of mind to write sermons, prepare reports, do some problem solving and generally prepare for the day.

Early mornings, before the sun rises, offers an intimacy and a tranquillity which I relish. Here I can think, pray and write. Early mornings offer me the opportunity, not to carry the burdens, the criticisms and the failures of the past, but to ponder all the possibilities and the opportunities a new day brings.

Indeed, in the glow of the pre-dawn, there is a sense of expectation and joy as the gift of another day is at hand.

It is fitting, therefore, that the Easter story we celebrate today takes place *“very early on the first day of the week” (Mark 16:2)*. It is just after sunrise as Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bring spices to anoint the body of Jesus. Here there is time for these women to complete those important burial rites and to, importantly, mourn the death of their Lord.

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The intimacy and the tranquillity of the early morning, especially after the turmoil that was Good Friday, gives these women space to do this. The dawning of new day provides the opportunity for matters to be addressed and for things to be done.

But such intimacy, such tranquillity is quickly shattered, it is blown apart as the women discover the tomb is empty!

Here the women are confronted with a messenger from God who declares: *“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”* (Mark 16:6).



Mark tells us the women were seized with “terror” and “amazement”. The Greek text here indicates a state of “trembling” and “quaking with fear” as the women were “amazed”, “astounded”, “overwhelmed” and literally “beside themselves”.

The women then fled the scene. Their dawn was tersely changed from a time of quiet solitude and solemn mournfulness to one of shock and utter bewilderment. That intimate, tranquil morning was shattered by a most startling reality - the tomb is empty, the dead man, Jesus, is gone.

What are to make of this?

Mark’s record of the resurrection focusses on this empty tomb. Here we have a starker, more confronting account than, for instance, the record in John’s Gospel where there is a warm, engaging conversation between Mary Magdalene and the risen Lord. In contrast to this, Mark’s account leaves us baffled, bemused and perhaps a little edgy.

What’s going on here, you may ask?

I don’t think Mark is wanting to necessarily confuse us or put us off. Yes, the women were terrified and, yes, the women ran away in absolute fear. But, in telling the story, Mark’s Gospel has a habit of running rather rapidly past the nice details to simply get to the point.

For example, in Mark’s Gospel, there are no genealogies of Jesus and there are no birth narratives. Mark doesn’t waste words on shepherds, angels, wise men or a mother with her newborn in a stable. Nor does Mark get into rich and complex theological themes like John’s Gospel does with the proclamation: *“the Word becomes flesh”* (John 1:14).

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Rather, Mark starts off his Gospel with a short, sharp, most profound statement: *“The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1:1)*. There are no other details. There are no explanations of Jesus’ earlier life and upbringing. The story simply begins here and then unfolds.

Note also that Mark refers to the *“beginning of the good news”*. Emphasis needs to be placed on the word “beginning” which means, in the original Greek, “initial” or the first thing in a series to come. Here Mark actually speaks about an unfolding story, a story that we are invited to follow.

And so it is with this resurrection narrative. Mark’s story of the empty tomb is quite abrupt and confronting. Moreover, in its lack of detail, the story is told in the form of an unfolding saga into which we are invited to jump on board and follow.

Let me explain.

Upon entering the empty tomb the women are met by a young man dressed in white who quickly instructs them to tell Jesus’ disciples their Lord is going ahead of them to Galilee.

Jesus had already explained this in Mark 14:28 and now the young man reminds the women about this. If they are looking for Jesus, they must head for Galilee. If they wish to seek Jesus, they must leave Jerusalem and travel north. The instruction is pretty clear. They won’t find Jesus lying cold and lifeless in this city graveyard!

And friends, in this, Mark tells us that the resurrection of Jesus is not the end of things. Rather resurrection is actually just the beginning of a new and most marvellous story!

Resurrection is not the conclusion of Jesus’ life and ministry. Rather, it’s an invitation to a whole new future!

In other words, the empty tomb on that Easter morn is a signpost that points to the future. As Jesus is raised from the dead and now heads to Galilee, his ministry takes on a new direction and dimension. Here God’s work of restoration, renewal and healing enters a new and most exciting dawn!



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Brothers and sisters in Christ, on this Easter Day it's important not to get stuck in that cold, empty tomb wondering what's going on. It's vital that we don't get waylaid in that desolate cemetery, somewhat lost among the dead and decaying. It's critical that we are not silenced or paralysed by the fear and trembling of those women.

For Christ is risen. Jesus is alive. And Mark tells us our Lord is already on his way to get things moving. Here Jesus' followers also need to move on. Resurrection is not about the present. It's all about the future!

So you see, this startling, confronting story of resurrection is not a story about the past. This story has little to do with the present. Resurrection is, and I emphasise, is, all about the future!

Easter is not about where Jesus has been. Rather, it's about where Jesus is going. Easter is not about an open grave and the saga of a missing body. Rather, it's about where Jesus, the Risen One, wants to take us. Easter is not about the fear, trembling and silence of those women. Rather, it's about entering into that unfolding story that points to the restoration, renewal and healing of God's creation.



So, where are we in all of this? As a community bearing witness to resurrection, we cannot allow ourselves to be stuck in the past. Nor can we allow ourselves to be consumed by the present.

I must admit that, with all the stuff invading my head, together with the often sleepless nights, I do allow the past to clutter my life.

And with all our concern about what's going on around us today with declining church attendances and a growing sense of being overworked or under-resourced, we no doubt allow the present to swallow us up.

But, you see, Jesus, risen from dead, goes ahead of us. Easter Day is not about the past. Easter Day has little to do with the present. Rather, Easter day is an invitation to the future.

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Brothers and sisters in Christ, the resurrection of Jesus is your invitation to that future.

Don't let the past clutter or clog up your life. Never permit the present to consume or devour you. Rather, as a follower of Jesus, look to the future and to all its possibilities.

For Jesus always goes ahead of us, beckoning and encouraging you and me on. Here God's work of restoration, renewal and healing draws every one of us on to greater things.

And, friends, Easter Day is your invitation to this marvellous, extraordinary future. It's an incredible, exceptional, most amazing invitation.

What-ever you do, don't let it go.

It is, after all, your invitation to move beyond the past, to let go of the present and to embrace the future with joy and hope!

"Do not be alarmed....he has been raised, he is not here....he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him."

Amen.

