

# Sermon for Sunday, April 4, 2021 - "From Stunned Observers to Hope Bearers"

Easter Sunday  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church  
Decorah, Iowa  
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

## Mark 16:1-8

Beloved of God, grace and peace to you in the name of Jesus.

One of my daily rituals is to read *The Morning*, an e-newsletter from the New York Times. This past year I've wondered if it's a good idea to start my day like that. Do I really need to read so much bad news? So, *The Morning* for March 24 caught my attention when it asked, "Is bad news the only kind?" There are many days when it feels like the answer to that question is yes.

But this morning, we say no. There is good news for our world, for you, for me.<sup>1</sup> Yet somehow, bad news is easier for us to hold on to.

The women at the tomb on that first Easter morning were accustomed to bad news. They lived under Roman occupation, daily life was filled with reports of violence and inhumane treatment. They had hoped Jesus would set them free. Instead, they looked on from a distance as Jesus breathed his last. They saw where his body was laid. They prepared to anoint him and worried about the stone at the tomb's entrance. They had grown accustomed to bad news.

When they reach the tomb, they are stunned by good news. The body they've come to bury with dignity is no longer there. They find a young man who tells them that Jesus has been raised.

Their job is no longer to anoint a body in the wake of bad news, but to announce good news! "Go," the young man commands them, "and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." What do you do when the bad news you've learned to carry is taken from your hands and replaced with good news? What do you do when you're prepared for death and find life instead? What do you do when the stone has already been rolled away and the tomb no longer holds your loved one? No longer holds you?

*You flee from the tomb, seized with terror and amazement, and you say nothing to anyone, for you are afraid.* That's where Mark's gospel ends. Silence. Fear. Trembling. Bewilderment.

Preacher Richard Lischer says that we move through the events of Holy Week as *stunned observers*. "On Palm Sunday we watch the spectacle unfold as Jesus enters the capital to die. On Good Friday, we stand at the place of the skull and watch the execution take place."<sup>2</sup>

And this morning we stand at the empty tomb alongside the first witnesses of the resurrection, and we are still stunned observers. We are stunned observers, as we have been throughout so much of this pandemic time, this Holy Year. We've been stunned by the death, the sorrow, the relentless bad news ... Yet I

<sup>1</sup> This sermon was written in collaboration with Pr. Stacey Nalean-Carlson, Glenwood and Canoe Ridge Lutheran Churches.

<sup>2</sup> "Stunned Observers: A Conversation between Richard Lischer and William H. Willimon."

Christian Century, March 15, 2021.

wonder if we haven't also been stunned by good news. I wonder if we haven't also been startled by life rising up in the most unexpected places and at the most unexpected times - new life emerging in the midst of deep grief.

Normally, I'm not a big fan of Mark's account of the resurrection. I much prefer John, where Jesus meets Mary Magdalene at the tomb, calls her by name and sends her to share the good news with the disciples. She becomes the apostle to the apostles and proclaims boldly, "I have seen the Lord!"

I appreciate Matthew's account where the women run from the tomb with fear and great joy in order to tell the disciples that Jesus is risen. On the way, Jesus meets them and sends them to proclaim the good news.

I even like Luke's account, although in his telling the disciples think the women are giving them an idle tale. People struggle to take in the good news, so Jesus appears to them to open their eyes. The end of the Gospel of Mark leaves so much to be desired. Where is the witness of the women? Where is the risen Jesus? Where is the resolution, the ending for which we've been hoping? It's not here. And maybe that's why Mark is resonating so much with me this year.

We are so far into this pandemic time, long overdue for resolution, for a happy ending. And while there are surely signs of hope and progress, it's not over. It's not done. And it may never be—at least not in the way we had envisioned. One year later there is still so much fear, trembling, bewilderment. We're right there with the women. We long to be more than stunned observers of all that has transpired in this year. We long to respond in hopeful, life giving ways in the world, but we remain silent and afraid.

The stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. Bad news is not the only news. There is good news here. There is life in our midst—new life, surprising life, life emerging from deepest grief, life irrepressible, irresistible, life abundant, life astounding. And it's terrifying. Terrifying because this abundant life is beyond our control, beyond our understanding, beyond our ability to explain or prove. It's messy. It's complicated. It's not resolved. And it's not over. It's new every day. And while it makes a claim on us, it does not depend on us.

The women, for who knows how long, lived in fear. They said nothing to anyone. They experienced what had to be an overwhelming encounter with God's persistent, relentless, death-defeating grace, and they could not speak of this good news. Who would believe them in a world that asks *is bad news the only kind?* Could they even believe their own eyes? Could they trust that their experience had been real? They had watched him die. They knew how to grieve. They knew how to cope with bad news. They did not know how to respond to unexpected life.

And still, the good news has reached us this Easter morning. God's Word accomplishes what it intends. The Good News does not return empty. It transformed those first witnesses of the resurrection from stunned observers to hope bearers. It transforms us. It empowers us to imagine new possibilities and new beginnings even now.

In the midst of our own unresolved story, good news is here. Good news for today and every day to come. Jesus has been raised.

Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed. Amen.