

“Like No Other”
Psalm 118:21-27; Mark 16:1-8
A Sermon by Rev. Bob Kells

My message this morning is called: “Like No Other.” This is a phrase I’ve been hearing a lot lately as people from TV anchors to newspaper writers to folks in the sparsely populated stores look for words to describe the unique time we are going through right now. And as the time we are in is like no other, we have to admit that this is an Easter like no other. Reach back into your memories of Easters past and you will realize this is so: We have no flowers adorning the sanctuary, no banners hailing Christ’s Resurrection, we didn’t put on our best clothes for Easter, there’s no special music to lead our celebration, and the sanctuary stands empty this morning. As followers of Jesus Christ in this extraordinary time, and in all times, we proclaim from our living rooms, our dining rooms, our kitchens or wherever we may gathered this day, the great Good News: He is Risen! He is Risen indeed! Yes, we will remember this Easter for a long time to come. It is, indeed, an Easter like no other. I want to talk a bit about another Easter that was like no other—the very first Easter. It was a singular event in the history of God and humankind for the simple reason that no one before that day had ever come back from the dead. Everyone, from biblical times to the present, understood the natural order of things: life is followed by death. It had been that way from the beginning. But on that morning long ago, God turned it all around. Through Jesus, God changed the natural order of things so that life is followed by death, is followed by new life. This was something new. Now, Jesus had hinted at it all along to his disciples.

- He told them what would happen: The Son of Man would be betrayed, arrested, and put to death by the religious authorities and by Rome.
- He also told them God would raise the Son of Man to new life.

But as the Gospels demonstrate, they never fully understood what Jesus meant. We really can’t blame them, though. After all, they had no way of knowing what Resurrection looked like because no one had ever experienced it before. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ was like no other event in human history.

I’ve used that phrase a few times now. What do we mean when we say something is like no other? The best word I can come up with is incomparable, meaning, there’s nothing to compare it with. No comparison, now, that’s really tough for us human beings and that’s because we make comparisons all the time.

Psychologists tell us the human brain is “wired” to do this. We make comparisons because it saves time and energy. We do this because it’s a shortcut; it’s easier for our brains to compare things, people, and situations, to our past experiences to help us make decisions. One of the most frequent uses of comparison is to determine threats. Is that dark alley safe for me to walk down? Probably not. My experience tells me I’ll be safer walking on the lighted sidewalk on the other side of the street. Making comparisons is natural for us—it is our default setting—to look for something familiar, something safe.¹

That’s exactly what the disciples did as they tried to figure out who Jesus was. In the middle of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus asked the disciples who people said he was. Their answers demonstrated all they could do was compare Jesus to other figures from Israel’s history:

- Some said he was Elijah, and every Jew knew who Elijah was and what he did during the time of Israel’s kings and that he would come again at the end of the Age.
- Some said he was John the Baptist come back from the dead, which would have been a neat trick since John was alive at the same time as Jesus, and had even baptized Jesus in the Jordan River.

¹ David Levari, “Why your brain never runs out of problems to find,” *BBC Future*, July 10, 2018, article on internet, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20180710-why-the-brain-always-finds-new-problems-and-threats>, accessed 11 April 2020.

- Some said he was a prophet, and every Jew knew that a prophet came to speak the word of God to try and turn Israel around so people would make God their number one priority.
- And finally, Simon Peter said Jesus was the Messiah, and every Jew knew, of course, the Messiah would come to re-establish the kingdom of Israel as God's kingdom. Israel would become a mighty kingdom then, and foreigners would come and kneel before the throne of God's Messiah.

Every one of these ideas about Jesus involved comparing him to someone or something else the Jewish people thought they knew. And in the end, every one of the comparisons was wrong. Jesus was the Messiah, all right. But he didn't meet their expectations of Messiahship.

- He came as a suffering servant to make atonement for the sins of the people.
- He died an unjust death, an innocent man, like so many innocent people who had been killed before him.
- When he died, Jesus took the sins of the world upon himself.
- And God raised Jesus to new life, not just to grant human beings eternal life, although that is part of what he accomplished.
- But in this new life, this Resurrection life, God overcame the injustice of the world. Jesus suffered injustice on the Cross, but God raised him to new life so that God's justice will reign supreme.²

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ is like no other event in the history of God and humankind.

- It reversed the natural order of things.
- It brought new life for those who believe.
- And it established God's justice which gives hope to all who suffer injustice in this world.

But some will ask, what does Resurrection look like? It looks a like three women who head out early on the first day of the week to tend to the body of one they loved. As they approach the tomb shortly after sunrise, they suddenly realized the rock that was placed there days before is too heavy for them to remove...and they wonder, how will they roll away the heavy stone? When they looked up, they saw the stone had been removed from the entrance to the tomb. They went inside, fully expecting to see the body of Jesus lying on its slab. But they are startled to find a young man, dressed all in white (an angel, by any other name), sitting on the right side of the tomb...and they are afraid—remember they had nothing to compare with this experience.

The young man says 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. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him as he told you."

Faced with Resurrection, the three women did what came naturally: They ran from the tomb, "for terror and amazement had seized them." And their fear kept them from telling anyone what they saw.

Many people have found this ending to Mark's Gospel unsatisfying. The women ran away and they didn't tell anyone what they saw? What's up with that?

- Where are the post-Resurrection stories like we have in Matthew, Luke and John? We want to hear about Jesus talking and eating with his disciples again; that's further proof of the Resurrection, isn't it?
- And what about Peter? Poor Peter, who promised never to abandon Jesus, who denied even knowing his Master, who ran away when the going got tough. We want to see Peter, on the beach in Galilee, where he is restored to fellowship with Jesus.
- And we want to hear Jesus give his disciples the Great Commission to go and share the good news, teaching and baptizing others in his name.

Only in these ways will the story be complete. Only with these scenes can we know all be well with the Resurrection story, right?

² Will Willimon, *Will Willimon's Lectionary Sermon Resource, Year B, Part 1*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017), 251.

Well, a lot of people have felt this way. In fact, in the years after Mark's Gospel began to circulate among the first churches, someone somewhere decided that to have the women running away in fear wasn't a very good ending. So, an editor added some more verses in an effort to give us a better ending. (You can look up the different endings in your Bible). But there's something else about the Gospel of Mark that makes this ending like no other in the Bible. When the women ran away in fear, "and they said nothing to anyone," the story didn't really end, did it? Somebody talked. Someone began to share. Someone proclaimed the Good News to others, otherwise none of us would be here today.

The beauty, and maybe even the genius, of this ending to Mark's Gospel is that it enables us to become part of the Resurrection story. How does that work? Well, let me explain by making a comparison with another story.

Years ago, a children's book was published called *The Never-Ending Story*. In it, a young boy named Bastian hides in a bookstore from some bullies who are chasing him. While there, he starts to read a book and is so drawn into it, he takes the book home with him. The book is a fantasy story about a world under threat from an evil power called "The Nothing," which consumes everything in its path. The more Bastian reads the book, the more he realizes the story is speaking directly to him. He becomes a character in the story. Eventually, Bastian realizes he must act to help save the fantasy world from destruction, or all will be lost.³

The ending of Mark's Gospel—if I can make a comparison—is a kind of like this.

- The women running from the tomb in fear makes clear someone must act if the story of Jesus is to be told to others.
- The silence of the women must be countered with someone willing to share the Resurrection story.
- The Good News of new life has to be modeled and told by disciples of Jesus Christ who understand that death does not have the last word, God does.

That's what makes the ending of Mark like no other Gospel, no other book in the Bible. The women ran away from the tomb and told no one.

Who is left to go? Who will tell the great Good New? We are the ones invited to be those disciples who run the other way, toward the broken world that needs to hear Good News. The words may not be there, but we are commissioned to share that good news with others in how we live and relate to one other.

God's incomparable love is shown to us in the Resurrection of Jesus.

His matchless life is a life we now share.

"...it is no longer I who live," wrote the Apostle Paul, "but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."
(Galatians 2:20)

My friends, this is an Easter like no other...but we have a God like no other. As Jesus went ahead of the disciples to Galilee, so too Jesus has gone ahead of us: beyond our homes and workplaces, beyond this season, beyond the Coronavirus, and into God's future. Jesus will meet us there. The Good News today is this:

- The tomb is empty!
- Love has won!
- Jesus Christ is alive!

Live it, love it, share it!

Alleluia! Amen.

³ "The NeverEnding Story (film)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, article on internet, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_NeverEnding_Story_\(film\)#Critical_reception](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_NeverEnding_Story_(film)#Critical_reception), accessed 11 April 2020.