

New Light at Sunrise
Mark 16:1-8
April 16, 2017 8:00 a.m. – Easter Sunday

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! We all know the story. It's a wonderful story. It's the central story of the Christian faith. Jesus Christ was crucified on Friday. He died and was buried. Then, on Sunday morning, he rose from the dead, the victor over sin and death. There can be no greater story. Christ has taken away the power that humans have feared most; and not only that, Christ has proven true to his promise not to abandon us. Indeed, even death cannot separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. It is a wonderful story.

But did you ever notice that one little detail in Mark's story: "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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb." Don't overlook that phrase: "the sun had risen." It's important. Both Matthew and Luke also think it important, for they also report the sunrise. Interestingly, John says it was still dark when Mary went to the tomb. John tells a slightly different story; and I'll say more about that at our 10:30 service.

But for Mark. . . For Mark, the light has dawned. Jesus is no longer locked away in a dark, dank tomb. No Jesus has gone out into the world. The light of the world shines forth. To borrow the words from the beginning of John's Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." Friends, that's the greatest news in the world – nothing, nothing can snuff out the light of Christ, not even death; not Jesus' death, not your death, not my death. The light shines; and the light will shine forever.

I suspect we all have our favorite scripture verses; and one of mine is the last verse from the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans. It's often read at funerals, and I've actually told people, "If it's not read at my funeral, I will get up and read it myself." Still, I think it too important to be relegated only to funerals. Paul 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 our Lord." The light shines. Nothing can put it out. That's the Easter story.

It was two weeks ago, as we considered Jesus' raising Lazarus from the dead, that I commented on the last verse of Matthew's Gospel – "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." That too is the Easter Story. Easter is about Jesus telling each of us, "You can't lock me in a tomb; because I will be present with you; and I will never, never leave you alone." I will be present with you in the good times and the bad, in the happy times and the sad; and, yes, I will be with you in this life, and I will be with you in the life to come." Indeed, Jesus is the light of the world.

Good Friday was the story of one of the most powerful forces the world has ever known, the Roman Empire attempting to put out the light of Christ. They succeeded – for exactly three days; or maybe it was only two days, depending on how you count them. But Rome couldn't put out the light. There have been many forces since that have attempted to put out the light; and the light has only grown stronger.

I recently read the story of how, in the 1960's Mau Tse Tung attempted to put out the light during the Cultural Revolution in China. The authorities arrested all Christian preachers and closed all the churches; and the Christians of China took, as their model, the first century house church. They gathered secretly in houses, despite serious threats from the communist government. Over the years their numbers grew, as people saw that Christians were some of the most loving people in every neighborhood. Gatherings got bigger. Churches began to rent space. Today, the government has given up attempts to suppress Christianity, as long as the church does not criticize the government, and today, there are over 100 million Christians in China. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Some people will say, "Yes, but in this country. . . In this country Christian churches are closing." Indeed that is true. But I don't believe for a minute that people are becoming any less spiritual. Yes, times are changing. Yes, for many people, "that old time religion" doesn't quite fit their post-modern lives. Yes, they are searching for new meaning; and I believe that we, the church of Jesus Christ must change some of our emphases to answer the call; and you'll hear more about that on Pentecost, as we discuss the call of the Holy Spirit; but I don't believe for a minute that people have rejected the reality of the grace, the goodness, the love of God in Christ. If I believed that, I would not be doing what I do.

That first Easter Sunday, the women went to the tomb as soon as the sun came up; but the tomb was empty. A new day had dawned. The light of Christ was shining forth to the world. The light of Christ continues to shine forth; and nothing can put it out. Praise be to God. Amen.

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