Reading from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 16: 1-8, New King James translation

Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, “Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?” But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away—for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you.” So they went out quickly and fled from the tomb, for they trembled and were amazed. And they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Sermon - Part 1 Rev. Wayne Arnason

This passage from the Gospels is a very familiar one. Indeed, we have used it as a preaching text for our Easter sermon before – just a few years ago in fact – so what is it about this passage that has been so compelling to us that we are coming back to it once again? There are actually a couple of reasons.

The first one has to do with perennial question that comes up every Easter for most Unitarian Universalists – what is the Christian Easter really about for me? We can ignore that question and just default to enjoying the spring celebration of flowers and bunnies and chocolate eggs, but for most of us, the claims of Christianity are too important in our lives and in our culture to just ignore. What is Easter really about? Is it about an event in human history, or is it about a metaphysical event when the world was forever changed by divine intervention, or is it about a faith event, a change in the human heart that Christians have been trying to understand and describe and transmit ever since the first Easter?

Today we want to talk about each of those possibilities, but because we’re Unitarian Universalists, we have to begin with history. We want to know what really happened in the life of the man Jesus of Nazareth before we can begin to understand why that life has meant so much to human history and what that life means to us.

So the first reason we are interested in this passage is that it comes from the Gospel of Mark, and Mark is widely accepted as the earliest surviving written story of the life of Jesus, likely written by someone who knew Jesus personally and knew the people around him, sometime between thirty-five to forty-five years after Jesus was killed. Scholars believe that whoever wrote the Gospels of Mathew and Luke had Mark’s text as a guide. So if we want to understand what really happened at the time of the first Easter, Mark is where we have to begin.

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The second reason that we are interested in this passage is that it’s not only where all the stories we have about Jesus begin. It’s also where our Unitarian Universalist story about Jesus usually ends, at the empty tomb. More UU’s are fans of Mark because even though the passage we just heard ends with the promise that Jesus has gone before you and you will see him again, that promise is never fulfilled in the original Gospel of Mark. Rather than ending with a supernatural events involving seeing Jesus after his death, the original text of this Gospel ends with very familiar human feelings – trembling, amazement, and fear. It also ends with a cliffhanger! Jesus body has been stolen!! Now what?? It’s a suspenseful ending that would rival any of the end-of-season TV series cliffhangers that we have become accustomed to seeing.

Whoever Mark was, he didn’t know what happened after that, so he didn’t write it down.
Even thirty-five years after Jesus’ death and well into the ministries of Christianity’s first evangelists and theologians, Mark’s story of Jesus’ life is just that, His life. What happened after he died in left to our imaginations, and possibly, left to the imaginations of those who loved Jesus, those who loved Jesus so much that after he was gone, they were dying to see him again. The message proclaimed by the most important early theologian of Christianity, St Paul, that Jesus had died and was resurrected to save humanity from sin and death and that all who believed in him would share in the salvation of eternal life, was not a message that Jesus himself directly preached. Jesus spoke about the reign of God, the Kingdom of God, and what it meant to enter that kingdom, not exclusively in any other life, but in this life, here and now.

There are no reasons in Mark’s Gospel account to believe that the women who came to the tomb that day to anoint the body, Mary Magdalene, Mary the Mother of James, and Salome, came with any expectation that Jesus was somehow coming back from the dead. When Jesus dropped a hint that this might happen, it was only to his twelve disciples at the last supper. The women were not present. The man at the tomb who made that promise to them was a frightening figure. After all the trauma and grief they have been through, they are left with nothing but an empty tomb and a promise from someone they did not know. Now there is no body to take care of, and no tomb to visit, nothing but their memories and perhaps their hope.

There is something very real and very relevant for me in this ending to the Gospel of Mark ends, because it matches my own experiences of profound loss. The rituals of grief associated with letting go of the body are comforting, but they mark a transition into acceptance that the comforting touch of your loved one will never be part of your life again, except in memory...and perhaps in hope.

I am not so confident in what I know about this world and this life that I can stand here and tell you with certainty that this life is the only one that we live, or that there is no way of being where we are consciously ourselves after we die, a way of being in which we will be reunited with our loved ones. Hey, I’m still trying to wrap my mind around the existence of cyberspace and the I-Cloud! Where do all those pages and pages of data live?? Far be it from me to have any certainty about what heaven might mean. So as I told you at the beginning of this month of sermons on the theme How to Live Forever, I am a genuine agnostic about life after death. When my father died, more than a decade ago now, I did not find myself either hesitating or comforted in that agnosticism, however. He was gone and I would not be with him again, except in memory and dreams. Now, don’t get me wrong, memories and dreams are important and comforting, and I have spent time with my father in those realms often enough that they are a treasured part of my continuing relationship with my Dad. But when he died, there was a finality to that experience. I knew that if there was any way to truly see him again, it would only be through dying myself, by going through the door that is on the other side of the stone that seals the tomb.

So that leads me from history to metaphysics, from the literal to the mystical. The story of Jesus in the Book of Mark begins with the words “the beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” So even though this gospel is the most historically accurate of the Four Gospels, it’s clear that the author has a theological message he wants to state right at the top – that Jesus is the Christ, which in the Greek Word for the Jewish term Messiah, and that he is the Son of God. This was a theological message that was a problem for both Jews and Christians of Mark’s time. It was problem for Jews because a dead criminal executed by the Romans thirty-five years ago isn’t what they were expecting for a Messiah. It’s a problem for Christians because you would expect God’s Son to have somehow done a better job on inspiring and rallying the troops to deal with these oppressive Romans, who are executing Christians in horrific ways, left and right, even as Mark is writing these words.

So whatever the metaphysical meaning of being the Son of God might have been to Mark, it didn’t play very well in the ancient world. How Jesus became the Christ theologically over the first three hundred years of Christian history is another story which we aren’t going to tell today. Setting that meaning aside, we are left with one more answer from the Book of Mark about what Easter is really about for us. Yes, for us, it’s about an event in history, a human life that changed the world forever through his teachings. Less likely for us is it about a metaphysical event that violated natural laws and brought the eternal God and the perishable flesh
together in a singular miraculous event. But what about Easter as a faith event, an event that changed human hearts and lives two thousand years ago in ways that are powerful and accessible and valuable for us today? That’s what Rev. Kathleen will take up in the second part of the sermon.

**Reading** from the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 16: 9-17  
New King James translation

Now when *He* rose early on the first *day* of the week, He appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom He had cast seven demons. She went and told those who had been with Him, as they mourned and wept. And when they heard that He was alive and had been seen by her, they did not believe.

After that, He appeared in another form to two of them as they walked and went into the country. And they went and told *it* to the rest, *but* they did not believe them either.  
Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.

**Sermon – Part 2**  
Rev. Kathleen Rolenz

For me, Easter is not so important as an historical event, or as a metaphysical event. For me, Easter is a faith event. What does that mean for all of us together, as Unitarian Universalists; knowing that some of us will claim a Christian identity, but many others of us do not? As Reverend Wayne said, each year we return to this theme—we feel we must return to this theme—because Easter isn’t just another metaphor for the birth of spring, it’s about the way we keep faith and hope alive even in the most dire of circumstances. It’s about the very human need to re-write the ending to every tragic story with a message of hope. And, it’s about what it means to love someone or something so much that you are able to have a relationship with them after death.

Reverend Wayne offered you the theological and historical grounding upon which Easter was created, and I want to take us into one more of the reasons this story keeps haunting us—and inspiring us—year after year.. The Easter story isn’t philosophical, it’s *personal*. It’s a story about friendship; and about abandonment and betrayal by friends. It’s a political story about oppression and torture; and finally, in the end, it’s a human story about love. So in order to get into that story, we have to explore a different ending to the book of Mark, a second ending that was added forty or fifty years later, to see why that had to happen and what’s really going on in this new ending.

As you may remember, the first ending of the Gospel of Mark, ends with the women, coming to Jesus’ tomb, not finding him there, and being told by a mysterious stranger that he had risen. The women, bewildered by this, run away afraid, and they tell no one. Imagine for a moment, if the story had stayed there. Imagine if they went back to their homes, lived out their lives, bore their children, were buried, without ever speaking again of the friendship they had with a man named Jesus of Nazareth, who died, not their hero, but a criminal, and laid in a grave. The first ending of Mark is all about the *absence* of Jesus. He’s not at the tomb, he’s not in the town, and his memory and ministry would be deleted from the history books if the story ended there. Biblical scholars tell us that the ending of this very first Gospel ever written was the one that the gospel writer, whom we call Mark, intended and wrote about 35 years after the death of Jesus. Maybe what happened after that was lost or unknown to him; maybe he wanted to simply let the mystery be—and we, the readers, would fill in, as radio host Paul Harvey used to say “...the rest of the story.”

The second ending, written by a different author, sometime in the early part of the 2*nd* century, could not allow the story to end at the empty tomb. Why? Why not just leave it there? I think there were two reasons why the writer of the 2*nd* ending of Mark couldn’t just leave the story in fear and trembling. The first reason had to do with politics and a theological position that is very different than what our Universalist ancestors would preach. We ended this morning’s reading with that text: *He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.* No respected New Testament scholar
really believes Jesus said that.\textsuperscript{1} They believe that the author of this second ending to the Gospel of Mark was written to encourage the faithful followers of the early church, already subject to persecution, to strengthen their faith by submitting to baptism. As is true with almost every passage in the Bible, you can interpret this literally—you must be baptized and be saved or else; or you can interpret it another way: “Live the way I lived; healing people, tending to the poor and the sick; erasing boundaries between class and race and ethnicities, and you will live in grace. Live as the oppressors do, and your life will be a living hell.”

I said there was a second reason why this ending was added to the last chapter of the book of Mark, and that one has nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with the pain and heartbreak of loss. Put yourself in the disciple’s sandals for a moment. They had followed Jesus into Jerusalem, believing that at last something big was going to happen; that Jesus was going to unveil his master plan for the revitalization of the soul; he was going to show the Pharisees and Sanhedrin what a powerful new Judaism looked like. He was their triumphant hero—they were excited about the future—they were starting to “get” what Jesus was all about.

And then, everything changed. Instead of people rallying around him, he was arrested, crucified, and buried. Everything he represented to them was utterly, humilatingly destroyed. And to add insult to injury, the first ending of Mark doesn’t even leave Jesus’ body in its tomb. It’s gone too. The final insult—that perhaps his body had been stolen. Their hearts were broken because they felt they had been robbed.

When someone we love dies—we feel robbed too, even if they were old, even if death comes after a long illness and there is a relief of suffering, we feel like something important and valuable has been stolen from us. I know that feeling. When my mother died on March 16, I had in my mind an entirely different death for her. I imagined us together, in the hospice room, with music and flowers. I’d talk to her—tell her that it was all right to go—that we loved her—I’d sing her to the next life. I didn’t get that opportunity, because she went into the hospital that evening, and by 1:30 they were wheeling her out of a room and into the morgue. I wasn’t there with her; I was six hours away. Robbed. It’s not the ending I would have written.

Of course, the death of Jesus on a cross was not the ending Jesus’ disciples imagined for for their beloved friend and teacher either. So, maybe, while sitting around the supper table, they began to write the ending they wished had happened. Maybe they began to tell stories, like we do after someone we loves dies—“remember when he was telling that parable about the mustard seed, and we just didn’t get it? Remember how exasperated he looked?” and they’d start laughing with each other. “Hey, remember the time we were in the boat at the Sea of Galilee and that big storm came up? Peter, you were so scared you nearly wet yourself—and Jesus just laughed at all of us and the storm calmed down?” Oh man, those were some good times, I can hear the disciples, and the women who followed Jesus during his life saying. And who knows, by that evening, they may have storied Jesus right back into their lives, re-creating him in such a way as to believe that he really was there among them—that some essential part of him was still alive and was now living in, and amongst and through them.

When we have not seen a friend or a beloved for a very long time, we may say, “Oh, I am just dying to see you again.” We don’t mean that literally of course, we mean that that connection and that bond is so powerful, and the separation is felt so keenly, that a part of us does not feel whole and complete until we are together again.

As with Wayne, I don’t’ know if I’ll see my mother again, or if she will visit me in a dream as my father did shortly after he died. It would be wonderful if it happened, but I can’t shape my future around that hope. One of our worship associates, Ed D’Amato, in a letter he sent to me after hearing about my mother’s death, said “Now, for those of us still here when someone dear to us passes on, we feel left behind. As I get older, I feel more and more like we aren’t so much being left behind, as we are being left to complete our own work.”

The second ending of Mark contains a passage that’s very important in Christianity, what often is called “the Great Commission”. It’s the passage where Jesus tells his disciples that now his work is done—and it’s up to them, to preach, and

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\textsuperscript{1} Placher, William C. \textit{Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible, Mark}
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teach, to heal and help others, to live in such a way as to give Jesus’ death its truer meaning.

So I guess despite all the times I’ve heard the Easter story and all the reading and study I’ve undertaken to understand the Easter story, I still can’t tell you whether it’s a history story, or a metaphysical story. All I know is that it’s a faithful story. It’s a reminder of the fragility of our lives and the bonds of love that tie us to this world. It’s a story about the way we make meaning out of loss, and sadness and tragedy that brings us to love again. It’s about a love so strong; and a belief in the power of goodness that is so deep, it can’t simply die on the vine, or the ground or the cross. That’s the Easter story that helps me when I am comforted by your cards and letters and conversations about losing my mother, and when we try to provide comfort to you at your time of loss and grief. That’s the Easter story that I’m dying to hear today, and will tell until I die, again and again. Amen.