

## I Believe in the Resurrection

TEXT: Mark 16:1-8

*Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Cranford Memorial UMC on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2026*

Today our series on figuring out what we each believe intersects with the greatest festival of the Christian year: Easter. We have differing versions of that story in each of the four Gospels, and the one I think is most helpful in thinking through what we believe about Jesus' resurrection comes from the shortest Gospel, Mark.

While dating books of the Bible is a treacherous business, the consensus among scholars, is that Mark's gospel was the first of the four to be written. There's also a good bit of textual evidence that the 11.5 verses of the resurrection story that come after what Neil just read, and that finish out the book, are a combination of different endings to the gospel added at various later dates.

For our purposes this morning, I want to pause at the place everyone agrees was written early, rather than its various other disputed endings, because it gives us such an important perspective: When the women came to anoint Jesus' body for burial—which they couldn't do right after he died on Friday because the Sabbath had begun—they found the stone rolled away and a guy in a white robe telling them that Jesus had been raised.

Notably, the women don't break into singing "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." They don't hop up and down and hug each other in joy. They were not reassured or delighted by the man's message—according to Mark, they were terrified. And, despite the guy in the robe telling them to go tell Jesus' disciples the news and to go look for Jesus in Galilee, they didn't say anything to anybody because they were afraid. And Mark, or whoever wrote down the *earliest* version of this story, ended it right there.

This reaction of the women to the empty tomb is part of why I tend to agree that this was the earliest ending of the resurrection story as it first circulated; because their reaction is exactly what you would expect, given the circumstances.

Remember that when Jesus was arrested, Peter denied knowing him and they all went into hiding with only John, Jesus' mother, Mary; Mary Magdalene, and a few other women anywhere near Jesus as he died. And it was just Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James who dared to follow the body to see where they put him, so they could come back when the Sabbath was over to complete the burial rites.

Remember the context from last Sunday. Jesus began the festival of Passover with a highly visible protest in the nation's capital—an anti-imperial procession, coming in the back gate of Jerusalem with symbols of peace and equality just as the regional governor, Pontius Pilate, was marching in the front gate, surrounded by the Roman symbols of war and domination.

Jesus is then arrested, tortured, mocked, and executed late in the week as a reminder to the population that, while Passover might carry a memory of ancient liberation, there would be no attempt to apply that ancient model to contemporary times without severe consequences. One of the reasons the Romans preferred crucifixion for non-Roman citizens was that the executions were very public; and since most were tied to their crosses, rather than nailed, death took days. It was, by design, both tortuous and humiliating.

Jesus and the thieves crucified with him were not anomalies. Such scenes lined the roads, specifically as a warning of what awaited enemies of the empire. It was a form of terrorism, as it still is in some countries today. Every one of Jesus' disciples, and those who surrounded them, had targets on their backs, as those who had supported someone now executed for treason. And they knew it.

Seen through the lens of what had just happened, rather than from centuries or millennia looking back, what the grieving women realized at the tomb was that now, even when it was all over; it still wasn't over. The body was missing from the place that at least two of the women had seen it being laid on Friday.

Who is that guy in the robe? Is this a trap to see who comes to mourn and arrest them, too? Maybe use the women to flush the men out of hiding and pick them off on the road north to Galilee? With the leader dispatched, are they intent on tearing out the rest of the movement root and stem? The women had no way of knowing, and Mark tells us they fled the scene and kept their mouths shut.

But, beyond the historical context for that particular morning, I like the earlier ending to Mark because, if we are really digging into what we believe about this event at the center of Christian faith, fear is a pretty natural response to that, too; and there is no one yet to write the longer ending to tell us how our own lives will turn out as a result of the beliefs we form about it.

While I was serving St. John's in Dover, NH, I did a funeral for a woman whose family was largely unchurched. During the collation afterwards, one of the woman's middle-aged sons asked if he could speak with me privately. He told me about the night his mother died, as he and other family members had been staying with her at home during her final days.

He said he was in his room and saw his mother leaving her room and going in and out of other rooms in the house. Since she wasn't mobile, or even really conscious at that point, and he wasn't even in bed, let alone asleep, he ran to her room to check on her. She was right there, in her bed, as before—not conscious, nothing had moved. By morning she had died.

He was frightened; not just then, but still, even as he sat with me after the funeral. I told him that he was not alone—that lots of people have all kinds of similar experiences as a loved one is in the process of passing. He stopped me and said, "No, you don't understand. I don't *believe* in those things!"

Like the women coming to the tomb on Easter morning, that man in Dover had experienced something outside his worldview. He couldn't square it with how he believed the world worked; but neither could he dismiss it since it happened to him.

He knew what he saw, both as he observed her walking from room to room and when he saw her less than a minute later, immobile and unconscious in her bed. And the encounter with something that his own beliefs said was impossible terrified him, since he had no idea where that collision of belief and experience would take him or what it meant.

I never had any more contact with him, and don't know how he worked it all out for himself, or even if he tried. A hopeful ending for his story would be that he began to stop insisting on what he *didn't* believe and think about what he *did* believe about the human transition from life to death in light of his experience.

Did he believe people had a soul or spirit? If so, what relationship do either of those things have to our bodies? What is the purpose of a human life? Is biology temporal or eternal? That may or may not lead him to acknowledge the existence of a spiritual realm; but looking back on the event with curiosity rather than fear could have helped him grow.

If you don't believe in resurrection, then those are questions that can help carry you from "I don't believe" to having a positive content to your beliefs, whatever they are.

Since the definition of resurrection implies a death that comes before it, there are some who reject resurrection and believe instead that it's possible to find a path to immortality—not just of the soul or spirit but of the body.

Some of the very earliest stories of ancient civilizations are about someone seeking that kind of immortality—and that human longing has never abated, right down to the present day. People turn to diets, freezing

themselves or their DNA, turning themselves into digital avatars, or finding some other kind of technology that will allow them, in some way, to live forever.

But I think our attempts at biological immortality all spring from our basic human fears—the fear of being forgotten; the fear of living a life that has no ultimate purpose or meaning; the fear that everything we’ve lived and worked for will be undone and everyone and everything we have loved one day turned to dust; the existential fear of not being.

Those fears are understandable, but can turn toxic and destructive. If nothing lasts, why bother with anything besides making our own time here as comfortable as possible, no matter the cost to others? If biology is the problem, let’s waste no time in getting rid of it and become digital ourselves—a voice, a hologram, a line of code—never to die; and also, never to truly live—a possibility that is at this very moment being pursued and massively funded by a certain segment of Silicon Valley.

When you say, “I believe in the resurrection,” *if* you say that, what do you, personally, actually mean? For some it might mean you believe spring will reliably follow winter or that a seed that breaks apart and dies in fertile soil will be resurrected as a plant. For others it means there is a life of some kind after this one—some believe many lives after this one.

For most Christians it means belief in some form of the resurrection of Jesus, specifically, which then can extend in any number of directions of what an afterlife looks like, and whether we get another shot at making an earthly life count.

But is there a Big-T Truth that the resurrection narratives in the gospels want us to know? Bearing in mind that my take is merely one of many, even within the narrow world of United Methodist Christians here in the United States, here’s what I think and you can make your own judgment.

First and most importantly, like when we talked about the belief that Christ will come again; the line we will affirm shortly in our celebration of Holy Communion that “Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again” is preceded by the proclamation that those things are a mystery; and I believe that first and foremost. The absolute truth of such things are known only to God and we see only, as Paul says, through a dark glass.

That said, When I say “I believe in the resurrection,” I’m affirming that Jesus rose from the dead to physically show us what happens after death, secured by the grace of a loving God. That is what I expect when I die, a belief that is helpful to me in this life for many reasons and will do me no harm if it turns out to be false. I’ll never know the difference!

I believe Jesus experienced a bodily resurrection and not merely a spiritual one in order to proclaim the sacred nature of the created order—the truth that physicality matters, bodies and how we treat them matter, and that the natural world is a dwelling fit for the divine and worthy of saving.

But I’m also affirming that resurrected life is the spiritual birth Nicodemus was wondering about back in John 3—something that begins during this earthly life and not only after our bodies decide it’s time to move on.

I believe the resurrection of Jesus implies Jesus is alive and could be anywhere in any form, no longer a man bound to the historical trappings of Jerusalem and the Galilee in the first century, but a being who still embodies unconditional love as the only road to peace, in whatever form we find it. A living Christ can be any color, any gender in any combination, any religion or none at all, any status in any society.

And since Jesus in the Bible refers to himself as a mother hen, a vine, the living water of a river, and even light itself; we will miss many instances of Christ’s appearing if we don’t look beyond the human world.

But, if that’s true, how will we recognize the resurrected Jesus in our midst? As a general rule, it shouldn’t matter, because Jesus called on us to treat everyone, even our enemies, with love and compassion and with

reverence for the God who made them, precisely as if they were doing it to Jesus himself. It's how Jesus taught his followers to live and is the only unflagging sign of His presence.

Do that and you won't inadvertently snatch Jesus from his bed and put Him in a concentration camp, or bomb Jesus as she prays, or mock the Holy Babe who cries for succor. Where you find the fruit of compassion, Jesus is close at hand; where it is absent, you are staring into the void.

But what seems the most true to me about resurrection is that it is simply the way of the world. The very dirt beneath our feet knows its way and, as we look into the clouds for miracles, they laugh and pour out the water they carried from far away to do their part to bring the dead back to life.

And in days of war and terror, as we disregard the basic sanctity of life in all its forms, should we manage to exterminate our own species; the earth still knows its Maker's intention, right down to the magma at the earth's core, and will set to work to do it all again until a day when a beautiful garden is again complete and compassion rolls away the stone.

Amen.