

April 4, 2021
Christ the Servant, Reston
The Resurrection of Our Lord
Mark 16:1-8

Have you notice, in recent years, the increasing usage of the phrase, *Just sayin*.?“ *Just sayin*’ can be used in a variety of ways, but one of the ways is to point out, in a group setting, something that is obvious to the rest but which they are too afraid to say. Carol is at Church Council meeting. Carol says, “Pastor Carl never has his stoles straight on Sunday morning. They’re always crooked. Just sayin’.” Now, nobody in that room wants to say anything because Pastor Carl is sitting right there. He, and everybody else, know that he has struggled all his life to get his stoles straight and could do a better job of it. So, the *just sayin*’ is a way of putting an exclamation mark on something which is true and should be said and everybody should acknowledge that it is so.

I wish that Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome would have – or could have – said *just sayin* on that first Easter morning. I wish they would have stated a truth which was shocking for all to hear, a truth which would have left an uncomfortable silence after it was heard, a truth which begged the exclamation point, *just sayin*’.

But, as our gospel writer Mark tells the story, when the three women got to the tomb to anoint the body they found that the stone had been rolled back and the tomb was empty. Inside, an angel-like figure told them that Jesus had risen from the dead. The figure told them to go tell the other disciples. But they did not. Mark’s gospel ends this way: “So, they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; *and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*”

That’s a terrible ending. Terrible enough that succeeding generations of editors tacked on happier endings. But that’s not the way Mark ended the story.

The women needed to go out and say, “We were there. It was empty.” Then, when they got incredulous stares, they could have added *just sayin’*.

Oh, don’t worry. You can get a happier ending in Matthew’s gospel where they go/tell or in John’s gospel where Mary Magdalene is the first to see the risen Lord and runs to tell the others.

The tomb was empty! The body had not been stolen. The angel told them so. And, if no one had had the courage to go proclaim that the impossible had now become possible, that the improbable had now become probable, that the ordinary had now become extraordinary – if no one had “just said” that, then we would not know that today. History would know little, if nothing, of this Jesus of Nazareth. He had been a good teacher, a wonderful story teller, and a great healer. Others had been these things. But no one had risen from the grave. We know, today, what happened because the women *did* run and say, “The tomb was empty! He is risen! Just sayin’ ”

Abraham Lincoln’s casket was opened in 1901 because it was feared that his body was not there. Christ’s tomb was opened to *prove* that he was not there. The pyramids of Egypt are famous because they contained the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian kings. Westminster Abbey in London is renowned because it contains the bodies of English nobles and notables. Mohammad’s tomb is noted for the stone coffin and the bones it contains. The Taj Majal was built as a memorial to a wife of one of India’s Shahs. Arlington cemetery is revered because it is the resting place of outstanding Americans. The tomb of Jesus is famous not because of what is inside, but because it was empty.

In John’s gospel, Mary Magdalene saw more than just an empty tomb. She saw the risen Lord, himself. Oh, she thought he was the gardener who asked her why she was weeping. She said, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” Then, this” gardener” simply said her name, *Mary*. And when he spoke her name she recognized him as the risen Jesus. He told her to go tell. And she did. She told the disciples, “I

have seen the Lord!” And I imagine there was incredulous silence. And she could have added, “Just sayin’!”

Little McKenzie wasn’t trying to start a theological debate. She just wanted to make a point about Jesus’ resurrection. Her Sunday school teacher had tried to encourage her class with the assurance that Jesus is everywhere. But for McKenzie, that didn’t sound right. So she said, “I know one place where Jesus isn’t.” The teacher was curious and said, “Oh, really? Where is that?” Mackenzie declared. “He’s not in the grave!” Just sayin’!

45 years after Time magazine asked the question, “Is God dead,” we are now answering the question, “Is the church dead?” The Pew Research Center had declared our Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to be “the whitest church” in America. For over 30 year now we have had, as a goal, to have 10% of our membership be persons of color. We have tried quotas and campaigns, but it has not worked. Now, our numbers are declining. They were declining before Covid, but Covid has sped up the process. Will we survive as a denomination? Will we survive as a congregation?

It all depends if our story ends the way Mark told it, or the way John told it. We have been given the good news of the empty tomb and we, too, have been commanded to go tell. But, if it all ends the way Mark told it where “they told no one because they were afraid,” then our congregation or our denomination will not survive. But if it ends the way John tells it where Mary not only proclaims, “I have seen the Lord,” but proceeds to tell them everything about her encounter – if our story ends that way, then we just may survive.

Some ask if survival is necessary at all. Maybe the church must die, they say, for there to be new life. I’m not one of those. The Easter message of “He is risen!” must be told by someone. The story doesn’t just tell itself. Where that message is proclaimed, there is the church. When the good news is shared, there is the church. We need to say to the world, “He is risen! He is risen, indeed! Just sayin’!”

Is the church only about lighting candles and ringing bells? No. But I'll wind down with a story about ringing bells which illuminates my point:

In 1799 the armies of Napoleon appeared on the hills above the town of Feldkirch, Austria, poised to conquer. It was Easter day and the sun shone brightly. The town council was quickly called together to decide what was to be done. After much discussion, the dean of the Church rose and said, "My brothers, it is Easter Day! We have taken stock of our own strength and have found it to be lacking. Let us turn to God. Ring the bells as usual and leave the matter in God's hands."

They agreed to do as he said. From the church towers in Feldkirch there rang out joyous peals in honor of the resurrection and the streets filled with worshippers hurrying to church.

The French heard the sudden ringing of the bells with surprise and alarm. They concluded that the Austrian army had arrived to relieve and defend the city. So they quickly fled, and before the bells stopped ringing, there was not one soldier of Napoleon's army to be found.

It is a metaphor for the telling of the good news. When we proclaim, "He is risen," the threat of death is defeated. When we proclaim, "The tomb is empty," sin is vanquished. When we proclaim, as did Mary Magdalene, "I have seen the risen Lord," that which threatens to destroy us disappears.

Now we are free... free to go and do the things Jesus went and did: to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to release the oppressed.

It gives us the power to speak to authority. Now we can say, "*Everyone* has the right to vote. Just sayin' Children who swim rivers and walk desserts alone to come to our country need aid and help. Just sayin' Workers need a living wage. Just sayin' Black lives matter. Just sayin'

Today we can be sayin' "He is risen!" But we need to be sayin' a whole lot more!