"Not Here, There"
Mark 16:1-8

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

Even if you don’t know Emily Dickinson, I know you share her hope for that kind of hope. The kind that doesn’t fly away. The kind that sings a tune without words and never stops at all.

It’s been more than a year that we’ve been focused on what’s missing in our lives. For all our halting attempts to regather, we are still more near than here. We approach one another gingerly, wondering if they have had the vaccine, not wanting to ask or judge, checking to see that they are masked, fumbling for an elbow bump or a fist dap.

My goodness, what a descent into darkness we have been on. Thirty million coronavirus cases in the U.S. alone, and more than 500,000 deaths. We’ve mourned so much and so long; it feels like morning will never come. And just as vaccinations are becoming available to everyone and we are making plans to

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there's nothing there about how Jesus conquered death and opened the grave to our own resurrection. The early church came to that later, after having had time to reflect and generalize. But first we should see how those earliest Christians experienced the meaning of it in the moment, because that's where we live, too—at every moment in the moment.

When the sabbath was over (that would be Saturday night), the two Marys and Salome buy spices to anoint Jesus' body for burial. He had been hastily buried without the customary preparations that tradition and grief required.

They arrive, Mark tells us, when the sun had risen. Isn't that a lovely English homonym? Sun and Son? When the sun had risen in the sky and when the Son had risen from the grave.

The stone has been rolled away, and the women don't know how or by whom. The most decisive event in the history of the world took place in secret, outside of onlookers. Think of that. No cellphone cameras to capture it. No eyewitnesses to testify. We don't get to see what God does. Ever. We only get to see the result of what God does. The rest is faith.

A young man is sitting inside the tomb, which is a cave-like structure with limestone slabs where bodies would be laid out to decompose, after which the bones would be placed in a box called an ossuary. The box would then be stored there, making room on the slab for another body to take its place. The young man is dressed in white, reminiscent of the vindicated martyrs and of Jesus' transfiguration. It's a signal either of an angel or at least the divine presence upon the man.

He tells them not to be alarmed. What? Yeah, that's always the first thing angels say, because it's always the first thing humans feel. The word means amazed or shocked or frightened. We need a word like that to express our jumble of emotions. But then he says this: You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.

The young man names Jesus as the man from Nazareth. He identifies the one they seek in terms of his former life among them in the flesh. Of course, that's who they are looking for.
But that’s not the limit of who he is anymore. *He is not here*, the man says. And *he*—Jesus of Nazareth—never again will be here. Because *he* is now the risen Christ.

This is the first thing we have to get about Easter. Jesus is not and never will be here—in the sense of being where we might want or expect him to be, confined to a place of our choosing and an experience we can locate and pin down.

This is why I don’t put much stock in visiting either of the two traditional sites in Israel where they claim Jesus was buried. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher is a holy mess of gold-plated altars and burning candles. Pilgrims fall all over themselves to be close to the place where he lay. And then there’s the Garden Tomb, where Evangelical Protestants find comfort. It’s sweet, in a saccharine sort of way. Religious romance. But no less a tourist trap. Exit through the gift shop, don’t you know?!

Jesus is not here, in that sense of being localized in one place or one person. He has been raised so that he can be everywhere for everybody.

But that doesn’t mean Jesus was raised into heaven only to be a general ghostly presence haunting the world in happy ways. The young man says: *He is not here, but there. He has gone before you into Galilee. Tell Peter and the disciples they will see him there.* Not here, there!

What exactly does this prepositional shifting between here and there mean? Well, it doesn’t mean not here on earth but there in heaven.

I was talking this week to my good friend and colleague in Brooklyn, Gary Simpson. You may remember he’s preached for us a couple times, the last time for my thirtieth anniversary as your pastor. We were comparing Easter sermon notes. He said, *I’m going to be a real Baptist this year. I’m going to preach on the Great Commission: go and tell.*

Gary was talking about how the tomb was to the women what the temple was to the Jews and what our church buildings are to us: places we want to go to see and experience Jesus. But if this year has taught us anything, it’s what we should have learned from the first Easter story itself—*he is not here, but there.* That is, he won’t be confined to
one place. There's no such thing as inside and outside with Christ. We can't claim the risen Christ is here with us but not out there with others too. And if we insist on staying inside the church—literally or figuratively, safe in our little here-ness, we will miss him every time, because he is always going there ahead of us into the world.

Kennon Callahan was a church consultant who liked to tell churches this powerful Easter truth: God is in the world. When the church is in the world, God is in the church. When the church is not in the world, God is in the world.

Which is why we must go and tell, as the women were instructed. And when we go and tell, we will see the risen Christ there as we do.

Galilee is where the there is, initially. It's where Jesus first began his ministry. The healings and the teachings. The everyday life of school and work and caring for neighbor.

That's the where that is the there. If we are doing here what Jesus was doing there, we will find him among us. But if we remain where we are here and lose all sense of mission out there, wanting to hold onto him on our own terms and in our own time, we will never feel the power of his resurrection in our lives or see it raising the hopes of others.

Between services today we will inter the ashes of Joanna Jones in our columbarium. Her husband Bill and I were talking about what it's been like for him since she passed. He is man enough to admit how deep is his grief. He knows she's in a better place, but he can't help but want her here with him as she was for nearly half a century.

As we talked, I thought about this Easter story and how much the Marys and Salome wished the same for Jesus. Even after being told he was raised, they would have preferred finding him in that very place. I mentioned my Easter take on what not here, there might mean for him with Joanna. Whenever the feeling of loss and pain draws him inward to where all he can feel is her absence, I suggested that he go to Galilee to find her. Not to northern Israel, mind you. Go to all those old familiar places where Joanna was most about the work of Jesus—caring for the hurting who need healing, the lost who
need finding, the lonely who need company. Since she belongs to Christ now in his risen-ness, Bill can expect to experience Joanna’s presence where he would expect Christ to be.

If you want to know the power of Christ’s resurrection in your life today, don’t hang around the tombs of your own despair. Go find him. He’s not here; he’s there—out ahead of you, still making the wounded whole and calling the wanderer home. Join him there. You will find hope there. Amen.