

April 4, 2021, Easter Sunday, Mark 16:1-8

When Saturday was almost over, [Lorraine Mariner, Jonnie the mother of Deb, and Jeanne] [Gitta May, Marian the wife of James, and Susan] laid out their Sunday best clothes, so that they would be ready for church on Easter morning. And early on Sunday morning, when the sun had risen, they went to St. Mark's. They had been saying to one another, "Who will unlock the doors so we can get in?" When they got to the church, they saw that Pr. Jim's truck was the only vehicle in the parking lot. As they walked toward the door, they saw a young-looking man dressed in a white alb and gold stole standing in the meditation garden, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for our Easter Sunday worship service, like we have every year. It will be online; it is not here! Look, here is the empty parking lot. But go, tell all your friends that they will be able to see it on our website, Facebook, and YouTube; There you will see it, just as we told you." So they went out and sped from the parking lot, for confusion and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were confused.

The Holy Gospel according to St. James, chapter 2021.

Hopefully, you recognized what I just read as a tongue in cheek rewrite of this morning's Gospel reading. It is a story that is quite possible, though. You may recall that a few weeks before Easter last year we were alerted to a new virus called COVID-19, that had achieved pandemic status.

Because of the threat of spreading what was also called the Coronavirus, the public was told to limit public gatherings and many churches, including ours, cancelled services. Most of us thought that in a couple months at most, things would be back to normal, but here we are today, services not cancelled but very much limited compared to years past.

Our reaction to curtailed worship services may not be as great as the terror and amazement that those women experienced upon witnessing the empty tomb, but there is one question we shared with them last year, and in many ways are still asking today, "What happens now?"

The women's silent fear was likely the original ending of Mark's Gospel. We now have two alternate endings in most translations of the Bible, apparently because Mark or some later redactors were uncomfortable with leaving Jesus' fate in question. Fortunately, it wasn't the end of the story, and neither was, nor is COVID-19 the end of the church's story.

Like Mary, Mary, and Salome, those of you who found our church empty last Easter didn't remain silent for long. The word got out that St. Mark's, and many other churches of various denominations, were broadcasting worship services to the general public in some way. The result was that we likely reached more people with the Good News of Jesus' resurrection than any Easter in history.

It always amazes how God can bring life out of death. Jesus' resurrection was, of course, the greatest and most magnificent demonstration of God's power to overcome death, but we have seen it again and again as predictions of the death of the Christian church have proven false many times over the centuries.

Before his death, Jesus promised Peter and the other disciples that he would establish his church and that even the gates of Hades would not prevail against it. Throughout history, Satan has

made many attempts to prove Jesus wrong, always to no avail. Now, I'm not saying the Coronavirus is the work of the Devil, but we know that sickness and death are the result of the imperfection of our world; imperfection that began with Adam and Eve giving in to the Serpent's temptation

Over the centuries, the church has been threatened by pandemics, governments, and even before COVID-19, perhaps the most dangerous threat of all, indifference. Many said the church was outdated, old-fashioned, out of touch, and boring. Traditional church attendance was falling even without the threat of infection spread by gathering in close quarters. Easter and Christmas, though, were times when many who took Jesus for granted most of the year were drawn to worship his birth and his resurrection.

The pandemic took those traditional opportunities to worship away, just as Jesus had been taken away from his followers and laid in a tomb, supposedly never to be seen again. But God's power over death came to light in Jesus' resurrection, and God's power over any and all forces that might try to take away our worship and our faith is being shown even as we speak.

Church parking lots are not empty this Sunday, pews, though not as full as usual, are once again occupied by the faithful, and many more are or will be participating in worship at home and in other venues wherever electronic communication is available, some of whom might never have crossed the threshold of a church building in celebration of any holiday, or under any circumstances for that matter.

For the women who discovered the empty tomb, and for all the Christian faithful that have followed them, life would never be the same after Jesus rose from the dead. Jesus' promise that he would be raised was fulfilled, his promise of eternal life for all who believe in him was made a real possibility, and from their witness grew a church that would encompass the whole world.

After the Coronavirus threat is over, and it will be over someday, life for the church will be different, in fact, it already is. Many of those folks who were forced to participate remotely have found it to be an opportunity to worship even when attending in-person is not possible. Worship with one's own congregation can now happen at home, in the hospital, in retirement communities, and in places where families might have travelled far away to be with relatives and friends.

Our Bishop, James Dunlop, has for several years now, been saying that the church of the future will be different. While I'm sure he had no prophecy of something like a pandemic forcing that difference, his prediction now rings true. While we often balk at change, change is, as they say, inevitable and, if done properly, change can be an asset not a liability.

Jesus changed the world when he rose from death to life. Death no longer has the last word. While in-person church attendance is down, in-person attendance is not the last word. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to guide and support us in his absence and there's no reason why the Holy Spirit can't work through technology as well as in person. For us traditionalists, it's just not the same, but for others it makes worship possible.

Alleluia, Christ is risen never to die again, and so is the church that worships him! Christ is risen indeed, alleluia! Amen.