Easter Sunday, April 3, 1994
THE REST OF THE STORY
Mark 16:1-8

In the Bible, there are four different versions of what happened on the first Easter Sunday morning. A few minutes ago, you heard the Easter story as it is recorded in the Gospel of Mark.

This gospel is considered by most scholars to be the oldest and the first of the four. The other three are Matthew, Luke, and John. All four versions agree that it was women who dared to venture out to the cemetery on Easter Sunday, just as all the gospels agree that women were the only disciples left after Good Friday. Everyone else was in hiding.

As written down by Mark, the Easter story has an unusual ending. Three faithful women followers had gone to the tomb early Sunday morning to finish the work they had begun on Friday evening. They had stopped their preparation of the body of Jesus for burial because at sundown, the Sabbath began, and they could do no work.

That these were women of extraordinary faith is shown by the fact that they went to the tomb even though they had no idea how they were going to get inside, where the body was, because a very large stone had been placed against the opening of the tomb. They knew they didn't have the strength to move it out of the way.

When they got to the tomb, they were surprised to see that the stone had already been moved out of the way. As they entered the tomb, according to Mark's account, they saw a young man sitting there who told them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. See for yourself. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him." Then, according to the Gospel of Mark, "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." End of the story. That's it. Mark tells us no more.

Matthew says that the women ran back to town with great joy and began to tell everything they had seen and heard. The risen Christ even met them on their way back. Luke says the women ran back and excitedly told everything to the apostles but adds that they considered the women's testimony "an idle tale." But as mentioned earlier, Mark ends the story differently and perhaps more truthfully: "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." What a letdown. Where did the women go? Did they ever get up the nerve to tell what they saw? What happened on Monday?

No wonder that by the second century, helpful preachers had added a few more verses to the ending of Mark. Later versions of the Gospel of Mark included supplemental stories because the original version seemed such an odd way to conclude the story. It leaves us wondering, what is the rest of the story?

I think many people come to church on Easter Sunday with that question on their minds. What is the rest of the story? It's the "so what" question of Easter. The Easter worship services all begin with the proclamation—"Christ is risen." We sing it in the hymns, we hear it proclaimed in sermons, and deep down, many people ask, "So what?" What's the rest of the story?

When you think about it, it's a bit easier to be a follower of Jesus when he's dead. At least you can count on him being in one place. Throughout Mark's gospel especially, there is this breathless, ceaseless account of Jesus moving about here and there. There is no time to catch one's breath, take stock, figure things out, sit back, and reflect. And Jesus even said something like that — he said God's spirit is like the wind; you never quite know what direction it's coming from or where it's going, and it can't be controlled or tamed.

On the other hand, it's easy to go to the cemetery and pay our respects. Isn't that the way we like life to be? We prefer things nailed down, so to speak. We want things to be predictable. We are born, we go to school, we get a job, maybe we get married and have children, and then maybe grandchildren, we grow old, we die.

And though at moments we may dream of something more, something beyond the known and the empirically assured, we take comfort that at least we know what to expect, at least we have a sure and certain grasp upon what is, and that compensates for any anxiety about what might be. It all ends out at the cemetery.

So when the three women found the tomb empty, they were afraid. Life is not predictable. What Jesus offers is not always certainty but more often wonder, awe, and amazement.

Thus, Mark never got around to putting the finishing touches on his story of Easter because the whole point of the empty tomb is that the story is open-ended. We have to complete the rest of the story in our own lives. Jesus is always going on before us. He isn't in a tomb. He is in Galilee. He is in Lincoln. He is in places you least expect to find him. He is in you and me. He will not stay nailed to a cross or sealed in a tomb or remain locked in creeds, theologies, or christologies. That's the rest of the story.

What else do we know about the rest of the story? We know that something happened to the disciples in the days and weeks following Easter. They experienced the most essential part of Jesus' presence with them after his death and following Easter.

Heretofore, they had seen him heal, preach, and cast out demons, but they had regarded these powers as solely his. That power had always been in them as well, but while he was alive, they saw those powers as only being in him. But now, after Easter, it gradually dawned on them that Jesus himself had taken up residence within them. Before the resurrection, he had been in one place at a time; now he was everywhere at once. After the resurrection, the disciples remembered that Jesus had told them in the upper room at their last meal together, "Truly, truly, I say to you, those who believe in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will they do." We are a part of the rest of the story, and it is always being written in us and through us.

These followers of Jesus also saw that Jesus' spirit continued to work its work in and through them, and it continues to work its work in and through us.

Not only is the rest of the story always being written in us, it is always being written through all creation. Easter proclaims a new way of seeing and understanding all of life. Reality is dynamic, not static. Creation is not some kind of large machine that runs in the same old ways and ruts. Rather, all of creation is seen to be open, expanding, evolving, and only partly predictable. Just when we think all things are going one way, something completely new — resurrection, new life — breaks in.

The rest of the story is also always being revealed about God. Just as people have often seen themselves and creation as fixed, static, limited, and determined, so people have also seen God in the same way. Easter reminds us that we live in a world where God and God's love cannot be eliminated. Just when we think we have God in a box, or in a tomb, or on a cross, or defined and explained in a creed, God's love breaks out in a new way.

The rest of the story also tells us that every time the powers of the world try to kill that which is of God, it comes back and lives on with more loving power than before. The rest of the story of Easter also tells us that we meet God in some surprising places. God is within each one of us, as well as surrounding us and filling all of creation. God is in the power of love that conquers hate. God is in the restlessness that compels the most impoverished, oppressed, enslaved human beings to know that they have the right to freedom and dignity.

God is in the holiness that we experience when we have given love and have received it in return. The rest of the story is found in surprising places. A young man returned from the war without his legs. When the healing of his body had completed itself, he was still far from returning to living. Something had died in him when he lost his legs. He lay in his hospital bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. He refused to talk to anyone who tried to help him.

One day, another patient of the hospital walked in and sat down on a chair near the bed. He drew a harmonica from his pocket and began to play softly. The man who had lost his legs looked at him for a second and then back at the ceiling. That was all for that day. The next day, the harmonica player came again. For several days, he continued to come and play quietly. There was no conversation — only music.

One day, the harmonica player asked, "Does my music annoy you?" "No," said the patient in the bed, "I guess I kind of enjoy it." They talked a little more each day.

Then one day, the harmonica player was in a jovial mood. He played a tune and began to do a little dance for his friend. The other man looked on but was apparently unimpressed with the exhibition. "Hey, why don't you smile once in a while and let a guy know you're alive?" The dancer was smiling as he gave the gentle rebuke. But the amputee said, "I might as well be dead as in the fix I'm in."

"Okay," said the happy one, "so you're dead. But you're not as dead as a fellow who was crucified 2000 years ago, and he came out of it all right." "It's easy for you to preach," replied the patient, "but if you were in my fix, you'd sing a different tune."

With this, the dancer stood up, saying, "I know a 2000-year-old resurrection is pretty far in the dim past. So maybe an up-to-date example will help you to believe it can be done." With that, he pulled up his trouser legs, and the young man in the hospital bed looked and saw two artificial limbs. His own resurrection began at that moment. Today, he is living a full life and helping other people to experience the rest of the story of Easter in their lives.

The rest of the story is this: The resurrection is not only something to be believed but, even more, an experience to be lived.

Walter Wink, a Biblical teacher, put it this way: "Resurrection is not a contract for a time-share apartment in heaven. It is the spirit of Jesus present in people who continue the struggle

against domination in all of its forms, here, now, on this good earth. The rest is in God's hands." And that's the rest of the story. Amen.