Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006
THE REST OF THE STORY
Mark 16:1-8

The significance of the Easter story is not only what happened on Easter Sunday morning. It is also what happened later. It is the rest of the story. The original ending of the story in Mark's account is abrupt. Three faithful women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — had gone to the tomb to complete the burial process. The tomb was empty. A messenger told them that Jesus had been raised from the dead. They were instructed to go and tell the disciples to return to Galilee, and there they would see him. According to the story, they didn't follow these instructions. Listen! "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."

What a letdown. Where did the women go? Did they ever get up the nerve to tell anyone? What's the rest of the story? It's no wonder that by the second century, helpful editors had added a few more verses to the ending of Mark's story. Later versions have supplemental stories because the original version seemed an odd way to conclude the story. It leaves you wondering, what's the rest of the story? Maybe, Mark wants you, the reader and the listener, to live the rest of the story.

I am convinced that most people, whether you consider yourself to be religious or not, intuitively sense that there are inner meanings of utmost importance in these stories. These stories contain strong hints about the meaning of life, the mystery of the holy, and the power of God's immortal and unconditional love.

That's why so many people come to church on Easter. You want to hear once more the rest of the story. These deeper truths of Good Friday and Easter are so important that if this day didn't exist, another observance carrying the same eternal truths would fill the void.

The Easter story is a simple one. Jesus was crucified and buried on Friday. Pontius Pilate, his advisors, the religious authorities, and even the closest followers of Jesus went to bed that night believing that they would never hear from him again. Those who opposed him were sure that the movement he started was dead or would soon die. They all believed in the power of death.

It wasn't the first or last time that people were sure that killing someone — or killing many people — would take care of the problem. Like many individuals today, they forgot that you can't kill an idea by killing a person or even killing hundreds or thousands of people who represent that idea.

It's amazing that so many people still worship the power of death. The Easter story gives an alternative message. That's why each Easter I'm so thankful that so many of you are here in the sanctuary. You believe there is a better way than killing people in an attempt to solve a difficult problem. You demonstrate by your presence that deep down you are convinced that the power of unconditional love as taught and lived by Jesus and others throughout history is stronger than the power of death.

Although his followers mourned his death, some of them were at the same time relieved. It would be easier to be a follower when he's dead. At least you could count on him being in one

place. Throughout Mark's gospel, there is this almost breathless, ceaseless account of him moving about here and there. You do not have time to catch your breath.

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 your respects. Isn't that the way you kind of hope life is? Most people prefer things nailed down. You want life to be certain, predictable, and without error. That's why some want to believe the Bible is the exact word of God as written centuries ago with nothing left to doubt.

There may be times when you dream of something more, something beyond the known and the empirically assured — mystery. But most of the time, you prefer certainty. So when the three women found the tomb empty, they were afraid. Life is not completely predictable.

Mark never got around to putting the finishing touches on the story of Easter because the whole point of the empty tomb is that the story is open-ended. You have to complete the story in your life. Jesus is always going on before you. He isn't locked up in a cave. He is in Galilee. He is in Lincoln. He is in places you least expect to find him. He lives in you and me. God's love will not stay nailed to a cross or sealed in a tomb or remain locked in creeds or theologies or in a Bible. That's the rest of the story.

Mark's account is so powerful, not only because of its abrupt ending but also because it is filled with metaphors. Consider this one: When the women arrived at the tomb, they found the stone rolled away from the opening so they could see and go inside. Nothing blocked their way. The power of God's eternal and unconditional love was open to them and to all people. It reminds me of the Good Friday story in Luke's gospel. He reports that when Jesus died, the curtain in the Temple was torn in two. That curtain, which had heretofore separated the "holy of holies" in the Temple from everyone except the high priest who was permitted to enter one time each year — that "holy of holies" was now open to everyone. These are powerful and revealing symbols. They are the rest of the story.

Jesus did not regard himself as a broker. When he healed someone, he never said, "I cured you." He never even said, "God has healed you." Access to divine healing requires no brokers. You are invited to function as your own broker in relation to God. Forgiveness also requires no intermediary. Jesus taught, "Forgive, and you will be forgiven." Jesus is out of the loop. Even God is out of the loop. The curtain in the temple is no more. The stone has been rolled away from the tomb. All are invited to enter the holy of holies. There are no barriers to experiencing the Spirit of God and the love of God. That's the rest of the story of Easter. Easter is a verb in addition to being a noun.

The rest of the story of Easter had its beginning when a young carpenter from Galilee began to embody and teach an alternative vision of God and how God relates to you. He said, "God is in the midst of you. God is the power of immortal and unconditional love at work in the world."

His ministry and teachings stirred people as they had not been stirred before. People who had heretofore been excluded from society and who had been put down as having little or no worth now began to believe they did have worth. He reminded them that they were created in God's image, just like everyone else.

He described God's domain as a huge banquet where everyone is invited to the table. As he went around Galilee, he gathered at his table — prostitutes, beggars, lepers, tax collectors, Pharisees, rich people, and poor people. All are welcome. The vision this carpenter represented was not new. It had been built into creation from the beginning. In the life and teachings of Jesus, it had been brought to its fullest expression.

At the same time, the hope and dynamism of this young carpenter offended people who wanted to hold onto another way of seeing the world. New visions of reality always offend people who think they are in control and that the power of death will keep them in control. The rest of the story of Easter is that even killing Jesus could not kill his vision.

Following the Easter event, his followers discovered that this loving Spirit of God, revealed in Jesus, lived on. They experienced the most essential part of Jesus' presence with them after his death. It was alive in their midst, and that same Spirit is alive today in your midst.

When you understand the rest of the story of Easter, you know there is no power strong enough to kill the selfless love of God. The rest of the Easter story also tells you that all of the false boundaries human beings try to construct — such as social status, gender, color of skin, intelligence, beauty, charm, wealth, and fame — are meaningless in God's domain.

The rest of the Easter story reminds you that all the tenderness and strength, which on Good Friday you saw scourged, buffeted, mocked, and nailed to a cross — all that beauty, love, and goodness — could not be sealed up in a tomb. The stone was rolled away. The Spirit of God, which was so powerfully demonstrated in Jesus, is alive and with you now, not as a memory that fades, but as an undying presence in the life of every single one of you. It is the strongest power in creation. Nothing can ultimately overcome it.

The rest of the Easter story is that evil never has the last word. To put it in personal terms, you can poison Socrates, you can assassinate Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., and others like them, but the spirit of freedom is indestructible. You can crucify Jesus, but the love incarnate in him lives on.

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