

Rideau Park United Church, Ottawa
Sunday, April 1, 2018

Reading: Mark 16:1-8

Sermon: There you will see him (Easter)

Anybody here ever heard of Flat Stanley? Flat Stanley was a very funny children's book about Stanley, a boy who wakes up one morning to find he is literally flat – picture a boy shaped like a cardboard cut-out. He is alive and thinking and walking and talking like any kid, but unfortunately, quite flat, which leads to all kinds of adventures, sneaking under locked doors and getting blown away in the wind – just use your imagination.

Well, I don't know who thought up the Flat Jesus movement, but it has taken many Christian development programs by storm. Basically, you take a picture of Jesus, photocopied onto paper or cardboard or fabric – and you take it with you wherever you go. And then you take photos of Flat Jesus at the hockey game or the cottage or the school gym. Here are a few examples: Flat Jesus at the beach; Flat Jesus in San Francisco and Paris, Flat Jesus at the Disney world castle, and even Trump Tower.

As one church website put it: *As Christians we are called to keep Christ at the center of our lives and to spread the gospel wherever we go.* The Flat Jesus program reminds its participants that Jesus goes with us beyond the walls of the church. Ever since the Ascension, the only way to show others Jesus is to be his body in the world.

Now, if you think that Flat Jesus is just a cute children's program, think again. Flat Jesus is only the latest in a long history of Christian people trying to make Jesus visible in the world, a Jesus who we cannot see.

In the gospel reading today we find Mary and some of her friends confronting their worst fear: Jesus, whom they have followed, was gone. But, as women of their tradition have always done, as his nearest and dearest, they were moved to go to his tomb and anoint his body. When he died on the Friday it had been the beginning of Sabbath and they were not able to complete the traditional rites. On the Sunday morning, the Sabbath has passed, so they rose early in the morning, to fulfill the care women have always offered their loved ones at the end of their lives.

A big obstacle stood between them and the fulfilment of their goal: "Who will roll away the stone for us?" A large rock, had been rolled over the door to the cave where Jesus had been laid. Rolled into place by several large men, and sealed by Pilate's soldiers so that no one could enter. How could a few women move the same stone?

But when they looked up from their despair and fear, they found the gravesite empty. They were prepared for the grief - but somehow that emptiness was even worse.

Among all four gospel interpretations of the Easter resurrection, (Matthew, Mark Luke and John) Mark's Easter story is the most odd – and also the most debated. Most biblical scholars agree that this gospel probably concluded where we stopped reading it

today. Basically the women went to the tomb, they found the stone rolled away, and a young man told them to go and tell the others. Jesus himself is a “no-show.”

It's like the surprise party where the birthday boy never gets there. They talked about Jesus but, according to the angelic young man, they would not find him in the place they expected to see him. In fact, the women would not see him at all – they had to believe in what they cannot see – they had to have faith in that empty place.

And that's what's hard. That's hard for us as human beings. We find it easier to believe in the things that we **can** see. Even if it is just a “flat Jesus” selfie taken in front of a Disney castle – it would be so much easier to believe that Jesus is in our midst if we could see him.

In the other gospels, there are stories of Jesus' friends meeting Jesus somewhere – in the garden, or on the road to Emmaus, or in a locked room, or by the sea of Galilee. So that's where verses 9 and beyond probably come from – a later editor to Mark was “catching up” to the other stories circulating about the risen Jesus.

Therefore it is not surprising that all of these stories were written down as many as forty, fifty, even seventy years after Jesus died. Just as the angelic young man said at the empty tomb – we have to find our faith in the empty place, and in all that that emptiness might signify. We will just have to take the truth of those stories on faith.

Yet we cannot dismiss the resurrection stories of Jesus as just wishful thinking or as fairy tales. Remember we are not dealing with our own world or contemporary levels of literacy – stories were told and passed down verbally from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, from generation to generation. These stories could be just as true as anything you read in our news media today.

But the angel does not leave them without hope. He also said: *“But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”*

The gospel story, as we read it from Mark today, ends in that empty place. It leaves us all wanting more. Some kind of resolution, some kind of explanation, some kind of epilogue to the story. Remember these were people who were grieving. Like us, they just wanted to know what happened. They wanted to understand. They wanted an explanation they could see.

But the mystery of the resurrection story is much, much deeper than any paperback mystery where you have everything figured out by the second or third chapter. Even we in the church who have heard the story told over and over and supposedly know the ending, we still find ourselves pondering what it all means. What it all means to different people, what it means in different parts of the world, what it means to us in 2018.

God's mysterious messenger gives them (and us) a few clues about how to go on in faith: He says to them: "Go to Galilee", which really means "Go BACK to Galilee." If you want to see the risen Jesus, you have to go back and remember what Jesus was *always* all about. Going back to Galilee means going back to the places where Jesus embodied God's mission in the world: Healing the broken, welcoming the outsider, raising up the down-trodden, unseating the powerful, feeding the hungry.

Remembering what Jesus said and did, they would see Jesus again wherever God's work was being done. Where the promise of new life was being embodied in the service of these little ones, the ones Jesus blessed and loved, just as they were.

Back in February I preached on Mark's gospel story about Jesus healing Simon Peter's mother-in-law. And the word that popped out of that story was the word "egeiro", meaning stand up or rise up or be lifted up. Most English translations use a different word when they talk about Jesus helping an ordinary woman to stand, and the great miracle of God raising Jesus out of death. But it's really the same word. Egeiro, rise up, and then they see it.

They have already seen it over and over: Peter's mother in law was healed, the man who was paralyzed was made whole, the tax collector who left his booth to follow Jesus – rise up – egeiro – and be free.

The other verb in the messenger's command, the one we usually overlook completely, is the verb "to tell". "Go, tell his disciples..." the angel says to the women at the empty tomb. Over and over in the gospel stories, Jesus had done these momentous things – these healing and freeing and uplifting miracles. Most times he told all who witnessed them: "Do not tell anyone – it is not time yet – keep silent – let people discover God's miracle for themselves." And we always wonder why.

But this time the angel says "Go and tell!" And ironically this time the women are too fearful to do it – too fearful that no one would believe it – until they started seeing it for themselves. They see it when they begin to shape their lives along the path that Jesus took: the path of healing and caring and welcoming and loving.

After witnessing the empty tomb, they would see that Jesus had risen from death. They would see him again, by telling others about what Jesus meant to them, and what he might mean in the world when his followers spread out throughout the nations.

It might seem like wishful thinking to us. It might seem that their belief in Jesus is pretty flat and one-dimensional.

Except for the way those stories changed their lives. They might have been fearful to begin with, but once they had confronted that empty place, they started to believe that the story itself was not done. When they went back to Galilee they began to tell each other what it was they hoped for. And as they nourished that hope – there they saw him.

In the healing of a sick woman
In the liberation of a sinner
In the insight of a blind man

In the welcoming of an outsider
In the love of their neighbor.

We become not just the hands and feet of Christ in the world, but the heart and the mind and the passion too. If we want to see Jesus risen, then we must embrace his love for God and neighbor – and embodying him, find our way to new life.

Now as we go forth in faith, I expect you all to make your own Flat Jesus and take him everywhere with you this summer.

No, April Fools! Let us just go in peace. Amen