

Easter Sermon – April 4, 2021

Mark 16: 1 – 8

by Pastor Dan Hollis

You're on the sidelines of a 10k footrace, a cheering crowd all around you. The streets are blocked off so countless runners can give everything they have. Their feet thunder by you on the pavement. Children cheer, vendors bark advertisements for hot dogs and soda, and dogs just bark, trying to get free of their leashes and join the race themselves. I've never run an official 10k before—our music director Wendell is the real runner on staff—so I may not be the best person to tell this story, but it's an inspiring one that's been going around for years; maybe Wendell's even heard it.

It's July 1981—I *definitely* didn't run *that* 10k—in Omaha, Nebraska. Hot sun beating down, crowd going wild. There's a world-famous distance runner at the race, too, a man named Bill Rogers. That day Rogers ran the race in 29 minutes and 37 seconds, earning himself a well-deserved first place.

There was another Bill in the race that day too; a man by the name of Bill Broadhurst. Bill Rogers was Bill Broadhurst's hero. He had *dreamed* of one day getting to run a race with Rogers. But Broadhurst knew he would never cross the finish line alongside Rogers. Ten years earlier, Broadhurst had suffered an aneurysm that cost him the use of most of his left leg. But that wouldn't stop him from running with his hero, even if he couldn't keep up.

To run, Broadhurst had to work twice as hard as the other racers. He would make a long stride with his right leg, and pull his left leg along after him.

Two hours after starting the race, long after Bill Rogers had won the gold medal, Broadhurst was still running... but the race was over. The crowds had dispersed and the roadblocks removed; the streets were back to normal and Broadhurst had to avoid traffic just to continue to where the finish line had been. It took him nearly three hours, but Bill Broadhurst finally approached the end of the 10k.

He knew what to expect, of course. There was no cheering crowd, no banner to run through, there were no medals... the only thing waiting for him was an exhausted and painful journey home. He didn't do it for any of that, of course. He did it to complete the race, and to know that he—even for just 29 minutes and 37 seconds—had run a race with his hero.

As he reached where the finish line had been an hour or two ago, however, he discovered a surprise waiting for him, just out of sight. From around the corner came a small group of people, and in the center of that group was his hero, Bill Rogers.

When he crossed the finish line, Rogers came up to him and gave him probably the biggest hug anyone's ever received, and as the story goes, he took the gold medal from

around his neck and placed it on the exhausted Bill Broadhurst. “You’re the winner, man,” Rogers said. “You take the gold.”

As surprises go, that is one of the best. At the end of a long, thankless race, pain and weariness throughout your entire being... and there at the end, unexpected, not even hoped-for, is your hero, wrapping you up in the most life-giving of hugs.

All that pain, all that weariness, just washed away by the joy of surprise. New life courses through your veins, and whatever happens next, your life will never be the same.

That’s the surprise of Easter. That’s the surprise that longtime Christians sometimes take for granted, right? We know how the story goes: Jesus is crucified on Good Friday, dies, and is sealed in a tomb, but three days later he is resurrected, raised from the dead, and his followers, his loved ones, who expected to find his body when they visited the tomb, discover the greatest surprise of all. For *us*, it all happened 2,000 years ago, and for many of us it might even be a little unbelievable.

But for the women in our Scripture reading today, it was more than a little unbelievable, and rightfully so. Because for them it was happening for the first time. For those women... all was lost. The race was over, and had been for two days. This great man, their hero, who they thought was God’s son, the one who would change the world for the better, had been defeated. Killed by the very oppressors he had promised to free them from.

But God had a surprise waiting for them. By the time the women arrived at Christ’s tomb, God had already planted the seeds of new life. *Resurrection* was God’s surprise for them, waiting just around the corner at what they thought was the finish line, and *resurrection* is God’s surprise for you too.

Resurrection comes in a lot of forms, even in our Scripture story today.

For Christ, it was a resurrection of body and spirit, a return to life for what had been a lifeless corpse. For the women who came to the tomb that day, it was a resurrection of *hope*. These women had watched their hope die on Good Friday, and an encounter with an empty tomb, an angel, and the promise of Christ among them once more brought that hope back to life, even brighter and stronger than it had ever been.

Even Peter, who is mentioned but doesn’t appear in this passage, experiences a surprise of resurrection. May we not forget that this greatest of the disciples was weakened by fear, and denied his Christ and their association three times on the very night of Christ’s capture... yet the angel the women found at Christ’s tomb mentioned Peter by name: “Go tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Even Peter, no doubt at that moment

wallowing in guilt and still more fear, would receive the new life of Christ—which for Peter must have been as much of a surprise as hearing that Christ was alive at all!

And then there is the surprise of new life to come: this tiny movement of poor vagrants wandering around a backwater occupied territory, whose charismatic leader was tortured, humiliated, and killed... it did not wither and disappear into the footnotes of history.

The resurrection that awaited the early church was nearly as impossible as the resurrection of life to the dead...

In the days to come, Christ's presence, Christ's spirit, and Christ's teachings poured out through the disciples to the entire *world*. New life found a movement that had no right to expect to live, and *we* today are living proof of that resurrection.

Just as new life was the surprise waiting for so many as the Gospel of Mark came to a close, and just as new life was the surprise waiting for Bill Broadhurst at the end of a grueling marathon... new life is God's surprise waiting for you. Resurrection is God's surprise for you.

And resurrection takes many forms. As we approach what we all hope is the home-stretch of this pandemic, I can see the promise of new life that God has seeded throughout our world, just waiting for us to reach the finish line before it is revealed. And we will of course see the *seeds* that were literally planted literally start to bloom soon as the spring begins to thaw the ground.

Many of you have lost jobs, or are facing illness or disability both short-term and perhaps lifelong... but the promise of Easter is that there is still a promise of new life waiting for you. Many of us have lost loved ones in recent years, or even recent weeks... and while the resurrection God has waiting for *you* may not look the same as the resurrection those women discovered at the tomb, there *is* new life waiting for you. I promise you that.

And of course at the end of all things, there is new life waiting for us *all* beyond the veil of death.

The *form* of God's Easter miracle, the form of God's resurrection in *your* life, in *each* of our lives, will be different, unique to us and us alone, and it *will* be a surprise, something we cannot and would never expect.

The thing of it is, Jesus spread the seeds of his biggest surprise with his followers long before his death. He *told* them what would happen, he *promised* them resurrection. Some doubted or did not believe, some took it as metaphor or spirituality, and those who

believed to the last could not deny their eyes and the reality of the valley of the shadow of death they entered on Good Friday. So still they were *surprised*.

What seeds has God planted in *your* life that foreshadow your new life to come? What sign-posts, what... clever Easter eggs... has God sprinkled throughout your life as promises of *your* resurrection?

New life is God's surprise waiting for you. Resurrection is God's surprise for you. Just when you think the race is over, when it feels like there's no more hope to be found or to expect... that's when God's Easter surprise will find you, and it will feel like the biggest hug anyone's ever gotten.

Thanks be to God. Amen.