

**Sermon**

March 31, 2024 (Easter)

*The Stewardship of Resurrection*

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Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

Mark 16:1–8

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Let’s rehearse the ancient church tradition:

One voice: Christ is risen!

All voices: Christ is risen indeed!

How are we called to be stewards of this affirmation that Christ is risen, the good news of the empty tomb?

The word “stewardship" can have a little of that insider church-y feel to it. Stewardship is often understood as fundraising. It’s a mistake to think of stewardship as *only* fundraising, as the necessary but oftentimes unloved work of inviting financial support for the church’s mission and ministry. Stewardship is not only that. But it’s also a mistake *not* to include money in a consideration of stewardship, or, to do what the church so often does: treat money as a necessary evil that we reluctantly discuss one Sunday a year and then move quickly on to other things.

At a deeper level, a steward, biblically and culturally, is one who cares for something and nurtures it so that its value grows. Stewardship, as one understanding goes, is the nurturing, cultivation and faithful investment of ***all the good gifts*** given to us by a generous and gracious God, and then the use of those abundant gifts with boldness and hope when the time comes. All gifts: time, skills, relationships, energy, space and intelligence. *All* gifts, including money.

*All* gifts, including the promise and vision of resurrection.

How are we called to be stewards of the good news of the empty tomb?

Easter is the ultimate Stewardship Sunday. Every other gift we are called to nurture flows from this gift.

We have heard the Gospel of Mark’s version just now. It is sparse on the details.

Through the lens of stewardship, images cascade over us. Three women take their valuable spices and perfumes to anoint Jesus’ body, offering things of great value to care for their departed leader and friend. When they arrive that morning, the stone is already gone. They are alarmed, we are told. No kidding! A young man first assures them, and then tells them the story. “He has been raised; he is not here.”

Then something powerful happens — the women, the first witnesses, become the first resurrection stewards, as the story is entrusted to them. They are temporarily silent out of fear; who wouldn’t be? They then find their voices and tell the story, first to Peter, then to others, handed on and handed on, across generations, even to this very moment, living into their clear vocation.

A steward's call is to cultivate the story, nurture it, and then share it, with words, actions, courage and hope. Every other good thing flows from that: a resurrection abundance where all who *need* to hear *can* hear, where people who are broken and hurting and a world that is broken and hurting can experience this transforming good news.

The alternative to stewardship is, of course, something like hoarding, privatizing, burying or even discarding. None of those will do. Think what would have happened if the women had done that — had kept the story to themselves or discarded it. They did not. They summoned courage, called up resilience, relied on one another and shared the story. That is our calling, no more than that, and no less. That it is a difficult calling, no less than a joyful one, is not in question. That it is needed now, perhaps as much as ever, is also not in question.

Douglas John Hall, a leading theological voice of the last generation, wrote a book several decades ago, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age*. It proved so popular that it has been reissued. As theologians do, Hall’s language is lofty, but his point is not; he draws a direct line between the cross, resurrection, stewardship and the world.

The practice of stewardship is grounded in the cross, Hall writes, and is not fully understood “until it has been wholly incarnated in the life of the world” (p. 127). “The resurrection faith of the people of the cross must mean,” he says, “that this world must not be abandoned, that this world is worth all the care and love and sacrifice that we can devote to it” (p. 121).

What does that look like, sharing the abundance of resurrection, being stewards of the good news of the empty tomb and incarnating Easter in the life of the world?

With resurrection, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright writes, “A new power is let loose in the world, the power to remake what was broken, to heal what was diseased, to restore what was lost. The kingdom that Jesus had inaugurated strangely, mysteriously, and partially during his public career through his healings, feastings, and teachings was now unveiled in a totally new dimension.”

How are we to cultivate this good news?

The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is marking the 75th anniversary of One Great Hour of Sharing.

Here’s a bit of the story …

Immediately following World War II, U.S. Protestant churches made appeals for relief and reconstruction in areas devastated by the war, primarily Europe and Asia. In 1949, the leaders of several denominations formed a committee to organize an appeal for support of the separate campaigns of their churches. Their joint statement in support of this effort sounds remarkably contemporary:

“This nationwide, united effort by America’s Christians has an importance far beyond the practical goal of fund-raising. For this great joint program will not only strengthen the vitally important relief and rehabilitation work of the churches overseas, but it will also prove to all the world how great is the power generated when Christians unite in a common cause.”

A program called One Great Hour was broadcast on the evening of Saturday, March 26, 1949, over major networks and many independent stations. The cast included some of the foremost dramatic and musical talents of the time, such as Gregory Peck and Ida Lupino. President Harry Truman brought greetings. The broadcast closed with a request that listeners attend their local church the following morning and make a sacrificial contribution. No exact measure of receipts was possible, but it was estimated that more than 75,000 churches participated.

The next year, the offering was repeated, using the name “One Great Hour of Sharing” for the first time. At times, One Great Hour of Sharing was coordinated with the Roman Catholic Bishops’ Fund Appeal for Overseas Aid and the Jewish Passover Appeal. From the beginning, this has been an ecumenical effort. While each denomination allocates its gifts differently, all use their funds for ministries of disaster relief, refugee assistance, and development aid, and each denomination does a significant portion of those ministries through Church World Service. Today, projects supported by One Great Hour of Sharing are under way in more than 100 countries, including the United States and Canada.

We Presbyterians focus on three causes: poverty (through our Self-Development of People ministry), hunger (through our Presbyterian Hunger Program) and disaster relief (through our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance ministry). These missions and ministries address acute and immediate human needs, both in the United States and around the world. They also address systemic and root causes and help us imagine a day when human suffering will be no more. It is no accident that we have linked these important efforts with the narrative of the empty tomb, a meaningful culmination of our Lenten and Holy Week journeys, liberating, we hope, neighbors in need from oppression and hardship even as we celebrate the vision of the rolled-away stone.

This is one way, at least, that we all can participate in sharing the abundance of resurrection, being stewards of the good news of the empty tomb and incarnating Easter in the life of the world.

Margaret Renkl is one of my favorite contemporary writers. In a piece a few years back (“Easter Is Calling Me Back to the Church,” *New York Times*, March 25, 2018), she reflected on returning to church. Renkl writes that “I will be at Mass again on Easter morning. … I will … remember the ones I loved who sat beside me in the pew and whose participation in the eternal has found another form. … I will lift my voice in song and give thanks for my life. I will pray for my church and my country, especially the people my church and my country are failing. And then I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection.”

*I will walk into the world and do my best to practice resurrection*.

How are we called to be stewards of the good news of the empty tomb?

Lance Pape writes: “After a long season of Lenten preparation we are ready to get a good hold on our resurrected Jesus and settle down for a bit, but Mark does not make him available for us. … Jesus is not unavailable because his lifeless corpse is locked away behind a barrier; he is unavailable because the stone is removed and he is alive and away on other business!” Jesus is not present “because he has better things to do than wait around at a tomb. The ‘young man dressed in a white robe’ … delivers the good tidings of Easter morning like an administrative assistant explaining why you can’t have a quick word with the boss: ‘You’re looking for Jesus? Sorry, you just missed him.’ You’ve missed him because he has moved on ahead to other pressing business.”

His pressing business becomes our pressing business.

David Lose writes: “The story of what God is doing in and through Jesus isn’t over at the empty tomb. … It’s only just getting started. Resurrection isn’t a conclusion, it’s an invitation. And Jesus’ triumph over death, sin and hate isn’t what Mark’s Gospel is all about. Rather, Mark’s Gospel is all about setting us up to live resurrection lives and continue the story of God’s redemption of the world.”

Practicing resurrection, living resurrection lives, is what we do, we who have received the story and have been called to be stewards of it. We will do all those things — gather, remember, sing, pray and connect — because the stone was rolled away and a young man shared the story with three courageous women all those years ago. And then …

Then we will “walk into the world.” We will take this resurrection news from this place to all the places, all the conversations, all the relationships, all the situations where it needs to be taken — just like those three women, confused and afraid, did that very first time. We will find our voice, our resurrection voice. We will move from the “what” to the “why” and then to the “how.”

Douglas John Hall writes that “stewardship means our incorporation into the being and work of the One who came to serve and not be served” (p. 249). Says Hall: “The deed springs from the gift — the gift of new life. It presupposes endowment by an abundance that must be shared by others” (p. 243).

New life. Service. Abundance. Our resurrection vocabulary and our resurrection invitation. May we be faithful, joyful, hopeful stewards of it, practicing resurrection, because death has lost its sting, love has come again and Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.