

Easter Sunday, April 4, 2021
“It Is What It Is” (Mark 16:1-8)

In recent years, I’ve found myself more and more using the phrase, *It is what it is*. I hear other people using it, as well. Maybe you even employ the phrase from time to time. But, let’s consider the context in which it is used. It’s usually when hope falls flat on its face – when things don’t happen as we would like or expect. With a sad shake of our heads or a weary shrug of our shoulders, we say, *it is what it is*. It’s an expression of being resigned to the fact that things are simply the way they are, and that there is no real hope for change.

Although I’m not really happy in my job, I’ll have to endure it to support my family. It is what it is.

My friend has let me down once again. Don’t know why I should expect it to be different this time. That’s just her personality. It is what it is.

I was hoping for a nice return on my investment, but the stock market has handed me a sizeable loss. It is what it is.

Last Sunday after worship, I said to Susan, *I’m very frustrated that our video equipment didn’t work; but we did the best we could. It is what it is.*

And no doubt, it is with this feeling of resignation that many of us have approached things this past year. Because of the pandemic, we’ve had to shelter in place, work and go to school from home, abandon our church buildings, and condition ourselves to wear a face mask, social distance and practice better hygiene. During what was coined the “new normal,” we all said things like: *I’m not as productive from home. My kids really need to be in the classroom. I want to go back to church. I’m lonely and feel so isolated. I want to see my grandchildren. But...it is what it is.*

Thank goodness things are changing on the pandemic front and we’re finally being able to worship together this Easter Sunday, but it’s been a long time coming. Perhaps that will make today even more special.

Still, we do place our hope in so many things in life that never seem to change. We seek relationships that will fulfill us, but we are unfilled, spouses who will support us, but we feel unsupported, friends who be faithful, but we feel betrayed, children who will respect us, but we feel unappreciated, and so many other hopes and expectations that never come to fruition.

Yes, we hope for life to be different – long for it – and may even raise our expectations in anticipation of that happening, but the change for which we hope often eludes us and there doesn’t seem to be a thing we can do about it. *It is what it is.*

This must have been the mantra for the people of Israel. At the time Isaiah wrote the words of our first lesson, Israel was in a mess. Internally, her kings were corrupt, and the biggest problem with their corruption was that they allowed idol worship – even endorsed it by practicing it

themselves. As a result, this led the people away from God. And when they did worship God, it was insincere. Only a remnant of those faithful to God remained.

Externally, Israel's enemies were becoming much harder to defend. Israel suffered defeat over and over again, making her captive to the ruling powers of her day. In fact, the northern kingdom had already been defeated and carried off to captivity in Assyria. And it wasn't looking much better for the southern tribe of Judah. These people certainly understood oppression.

It was to this troubled society – a society that, no doubt, believed God had abandoned them - that Isaiah proclaimed the word of the Lord. And in that proclamation, he had a vision that God would ultimately win a great victory for his people – a victory over doubt, despair, and even death itself.

The vision was of God hosting a mountaintop feast for all his people, complete with rich food and well-aged wine. There he will wipe the tears from their faces, take away their disgrace, and swallow up death forever. And the people will respond by saying, *This is our God; we have waited for him so that he might save us.*

The salvation of God was the great hope and expectation Isaiah laid before the people. For centuries – seven of them, in fact – Israel watched and hoped for the day when God would accomplish what Isaiah had prophesied. But that day never seemed to come. Nation after nation controlled and oppressed the Jews. They were beaten down at every turn and saw no signs of a new day coming. In resignation, they must have thought, *This is just the way it's going to be. It is what it is.* For 700 years: *It is what it is. Can we ever expect things to be different?*

Then, while Israel was under Roman occupation, Jesus of Nazareth burst on to the scene, proclaiming that the Kingdom of God was at hand and was being fulfilled in him. As he astounded the people with his words of wisdom and astonished them with the miracles he performed, Jesus amassed a lot of followers. And these followers began to have hope. Could he be the promised one of God, the one who would deliver them and take away their disgrace by returning their nation to them?

Their hope continued to build, and on that first Palm Sunday, it began to soar. Amid rapturous shouts of acclamation and the waving of palm branches, Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem on a donkey. He was honored as the King for whom they had waited, the one who had come to save them. And when he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple, the people began having visions of a new era. Things were finally about to change – and for the better.

But the Jewish religious leaders didn't like what they saw. Jesus was a threat to them and, in their minds, a threat to all of Judaism. So they went to work to get rid of him. After conspiring with one of the disciples to betray him, Jesus was arrested and hauled before the high priest and other Jewish leaders. Early on Friday, they turned him over to Pilate and incited the crowd against him. The shouts of *Hosanna!* quickly turned to shouts of *Crucify him!* and Pilate felt he had no choice but to order the execution. So, after enduring mockery and physical abuse, Jesus was nailed to the cross and hung up to die.

Some of Jesus' followers stood on Calvary's hill and watched as this man, the one in whom they had placed their hopes and dreams, and expectations was murdered like a common criminal. Mark tells us that, among those present, were Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome. These faithful women watched him moan in pain and gasp for every breath, until finally, mercifully, he died. They watched as Joseph of Airmethea wrapped his lifeless body in a burial cloth and laid it in a tomb Joseph had recently carved out of the rock. They watched as a massive stone was placed at the entrance of the tomb.

Jesus was dead, and he was buried. Buried also were the hope, dreams, and visions these women held – not only for themselves, but for Israel. Just when they and so many others had begun to believe that, after a seven hundred year history of oppression, things could be different, they were hit in the face with the reality that things would never change. *It is what it is.*

This is the frame of mind with which those three women approached Jesus' tomb when the Sabbath – which they, no doubt, observed with heavy hearts – was over. Very early on the first day of the week, they went to the tomb bearing the spices they would use to finish preparing Jesus' body for its resting place.

On they way, they discussed a problem they would encounter, *Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?* But once that obstacle was removed, they were sure they would find inside that tomb the dead body of Jesus. They would make their visit, pay their respects, and do the anointing with spices they had brought. Then they would walk away knowing what they'd always known: you're born, you die, and those you leave behind must learn to go on without you. *It is what it is.*

But little did they know that God had beaten them to the tomb! They arrived to find the stone already rolled away. Entering the tomb, they expected to find Jesus' corpse – the one they saw removed from the cross and placed there. The last thing they expected was to find a young man (an angel), dressed in a white robe (imagine their surprise). And the last thing they expected him to say was, *Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.*

No, they definitely weren't expecting *that*. For by that proclamation – the first Easter sermon ever preached – God declared that death and the grave were not the end of the road – not for Jesus, not for those women, and not for us. Rather, the One who had died as the final, perfect sacrifice for the sin of the world, had now conquered the grave. By his resurrection, he had swallowed up death forever – just as Isaiah had prophesied.

I can almost imagine the flood of emotions the women experienced at being given this unbelievably good news: fear, amazement, astonishment, and hope! I can almost hear them gasp at what they had just seen and heard. There they were, surrounded by the darkness and dampness of the tomb, standing in a place of death; yet being given a message of life. The gloom, hopelessness, and darkness of Good Friday had now been replaced with joy and a reason to celebrate. But they didn't really know what to do with this good news. Mark tells us that they fled from the tomb and told no one. They obviously did, or we wouldn't be here today. But Mark's confusing ending is a sermon for another Easter.

I like to imagine that as they left the tomb, the sun had fully risen and these women walked out of the darkness into the light of a new day, out of the emptiness of the tomb into the fullness of life, out of this place of death into a world where Jesus, the risen Son of God, now reigns, into a world that will never be the same – a world that *is more than what it is*.

The message that Christ had risen assured these women that God had not abandoned them; and God has not abandoned us. This message assures us that even in the darkest and most hopeless times of our lives, there *is* hope. The Easter story declares that the redemptive power of the living Christ and the peace he brings are ever present in our lives. His power and peace surround us today, as we come together after a long dark year of having our lives disrupted by a global pandemic.

The Easter story is what gives us hope when walk away from the graveside into an uncertain future without our loved one. The Easter story gives us hope when we're in the hospital bed, battling a serious illness or when our loved one is hanging by a thread. It provides us the hope of a forgiving heart when we're consumed with the need for revenge and the strength to ask for forgiveness when we've broken a relationship. It calms our fears when we're trying to extricate ourselves from a bad situation of our own making and gives us strength to be the change we want to see. The Easter story brings power, peace and strength to our lives. It helps us overcome our fears, handle our past, and face the future with the confident assurance that Christ walks with us.

The good news that Christ is risen should make us gasp – just as it made the women at the tomb. We should gasp not only at the wonder and magnitude of the resurrection of Christ from the dead, but how that event continues to impact and bring meaning to our lives even 2,000 years later.

The Easter story tells us that things don't have to stay the same. It tells us that everything we've come to expect is up for grabs because we have a God who keeps his promise. And the one thing we can definitely say about God's promise is this: *it is what it is!*

God's promise can be trusted. It will never fail us. Living in the light of the resurrection – a testimony to the truth of God's promise – we have the hopeful expectation that the risen, living Lord will transform our dark Good Friday into a glorious Easter day!

Thanks be to God! And all God's people say, Amen.