

Easter

The first words Jesus speaks in Mark's gospel are "the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news."

If you've heard me preach often enough, you know that probably my single most prevalent message is that the mission of Jesus had far more to do with life in the here and now than what happens after we die.

Yes, in the end we follow Jesus into our own actual death and into resurrection. But most of what he taught had to do with how we live in the kingdom in the here and now.

Each passage we've read over the last few months reveals something of the kingdom of God.

We learned that in the kingdom of God, people are healed. They are restored to their families and communities. Families and communities are restored to wholeness when the lost and broken are welcomed home.

In the kingdom of God, forgiveness frees people from those things that leave them paralyzed.

In the kingdom of God, demons are confronted...and cast out.

In the kingdom of God, people are fed – even when it doesn't seem like there will be enough.

In the kingdom of God, all will live by the greatest commandments – to love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

We learned that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed – it starts as a tiny seed and grows to become sturdy, invasive, and impossible to get rid of.

In the kingdom of God, our relationship to money and possessions will be set right. We will understand that everything belongs to God and our money and possessions will be a way for us to love our neighbors, not just benefit ourselves.

In the kingdom of God, we will not seek our own greatness, but will be willing to become servant of all.

None of those really seem like things that should get you executed by the state. And yet Jesus was. Why? This is a crucial question for us, because it's how we understand the impact of what we celebrate today.

Christianity has built up this elaborate explanation of what Jesus' death meant. Probably the most familiar explanation to many of us says that Jesus died as a substitute for us – we deserve death, but God sent Jesus to die in our place.

There is nothing in Mark's gospel – nor Matthew, Luke nor John – to support that. Jesus did not teach that.

The reality is, Jesus was executed by Rome for political reasons.

At our Maundy Thursday service, we journeyed with Jesus through his last week. From Sunday through Thursday, it became increasingly clear why the authorities feared Jesus enough to want him dead.

The first – and probably most significant for Rome itself was this kingdom thing. Kingdom is a political entity. And neither Rome nor Caesar were interested in a competitor. In fact, Rome had an entire system of cruelty built up to deal with any would-be competitor or challenger to the emperor.

As for the Temple authorities? They had become Rome's proxy government over the Jews. And in a nutshell, Jesus revealed to the Temple authorities that rather than participating in God's rule...the kingdom of God...they instead were backing an Empire that deprived people of justice.

The Roman empire, like most kingdoms of our world, was based on domination. Wealth and power ruled, not love.

People struggled under the weight of the empire's taxation policies. People died at the hands of the empire when they dared to speak against it.

And the Temple authorities – the very people who were to serve God's people – had become unholy collaborators with the empire.

Jesus and the kingdom of God collided with a massive political and religious crushing machine. That's why Jesus died.

What the resurrection means then is that the empire didn't win. Power and wealth at the expense of the vulnerable does not win. They thought they did on Friday. But on Sunday, it turned out they didn't.

If this were simply a clash of powers limited to that time and place, it wouldn't really have mattered that much to us today.

Jesus called his disciples to follow him...to take up their own cross and follow him into the kingdom of God. Jesus knew that meant following him through death into resurrection one way or another.

He invited his followers to be part of the kingdom of God...to be part of a new way of life. And he knew it was a way of life that would always meet resistance from those who lived by the rules of this world – the rules of domination and violence.

There is no room in this understanding for Jesus as a substitute for anyone. Jesus did not let his disciples off the hook in that way. Neither does he let us off the hook.

Mark's gospel ends rather abruptly. There are no resurrection appearances. All the disciples get is a message from Jesus...your first task in this resurrection life awaits you in Galilee. I will go ahead of you...follow me.

There has always been debate about that ending. It bothered a couple later scribes so much they added their own endings.

But I think Mark meant for it to end this way, because it invites his readers - now us – to take our place in the story as it plays out from there.

Jesus doesn't offer to substitute for us in some elaborate atonement scheme. He calls us to follow him...to follow him through death to resurrection.

Ultimately that will mean our physical death. But in the meantime, we have so many opportunities to take up our cross and follow him before that final death into new life.

So how do we know where to follow him? Where does he want us to go? The whole of the gospel of Mark...and the other three...tell us.

We go to the places Jesus went. We confront the demons of our time and place – demons that convince one group to hate another, to consider them inferior – maybe not even human.

And as anyone who has fought demons like racism and the like can tell you, those demons will not go down without a fight. Sometimes a dangerous, even deadly fight. And when we fight that fight, we come face to face with our own demons which need to die.

We follow Jesus to the places where people are sick or disabled. We go to places where people are hungry. And we die to our ability to ignore the suffering of others.

We not only find ways to help, but we challenge the systems in our world that allow people to suffer unnecessarily.

We challenge the things we take for granted about the economy – we become willing to give up some of our own comfort for the sake of others. And then we come face to face with the ways in which we benefit from systems that hurt others...we begin the process of dying to our own selfishness.

We practice forgiveness and restoration when what the world demands is punishment. And we confront our own need for forgiveness.

We do not take up our cross by doing acts of charity, however helpful those might be for the good of the kingdom. It's when we practice mercy and advocate for justice that we too follow Jesus into the teeth of the powers. The kingdoms of this world will not give up power without a fight.

Proclaiming and enacting the kingdom of God are still unpopular. But that's how we follow Jesus.

It can be scary if we take Jesus' call to follow him seriously. But remember the message he left those first disciples...go to Galilee and I'll meet you there.

Wherever we go to further the kingdom, Jesus goes ahead of us and meets us there.

And however hard it is, even dangerous, on the other side is the resurrected life. A life that on this side of eternity looks more and more like the kingdom of God.

When we follow Jesus, we die to our own addictions to possessions, power, the need to one up everyone, the need to be right, the need to be a victim. And when we follow Jesus, we learn that in the resurrection life, those sins and addictions no longer have power over us. We die to them.

The risen Jesus told his disciples to go to Galilee and he would meet them there. Where will that be for us? Where is Jesus calling you to follow?

Wherever that may be for any of us, we can trust that Jesus will draw us into this resurrection life...a life where sin and evil do not win...a life where even death can't win.