

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, April 20, 2025

---

Gracious One, you are as close as our very next breath, so dwell amongst us in this time. Fall fresh upon us. As we hear your word read and proclaimed, may we sense comfort and peace. May we also be challenged and called forth from this place. Speak your word to us in this hour, O Risen Christ. Amen

So, if you've been with us during the season of Lent, then you know that we spent those weeks studying, reflecting on the seven last words of Christ. All of those sermons can be found, including Maundy Thursday, can be found on our YouTube page, so we invite you to go to that place and hear those words proclaimed in that place. If you're not subscribed, like, share, and subscribe, please. There's important things that we learn from Jesus in the words that he speaks on the cross, okay, and important teachings for us. We've spent most of the season of Lent in Luke and Matthew and John, and this morning we come to the Gospel according to Mark. So we're going to read together chapter 16, verses 1-8.

*When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 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." So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.*

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So throughout Lent we've listened to the words of Jesus from Matthew and Luke and John. This day we move to the Gospel of Mark. If we had stayed in one of those other gospels, we would have encountered a different type of story this morning. If we had spent time this morning reflecting on Matthew, then we would have met Jesus along with those who were fleeing from the tomb upon finding it empty and having an angelic experience there. They ran away, and it was in their running away that Jesus met them, appeared to them there, made himself known in the resurrected form. If we had studied instead the Gospel according to Luke, we would not have met Jesus at the tomb, but we would have met Jesus on the road to Emmaus not too long thereafter. He would have been an unknown companion, a stranger to us until the end of the day when we invited him to sit at table, and he broke bread, and our eyes would have been open to him. That's if we would have spent time in Luke. If we would have instead spent time in the

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David J. Powers

Sunday, April 20, 2025

---

Gospel according to John, he would have met us there just outside the tomb, and we would—as those who made their way early in the morning—we would have imagined him to be the gardener, not recognizing him. But we don't study those gospels this day. Instead, we read from the Gospel according to Mark. The other gospels give us Jesus, but not the Gospel of Mark. All the Gospel of Mark offers is a promise—"He is going ahead of you," the one dressed in white, the young man there tells Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome. When they arrive expecting to have to figure out a way to remove that large stone from the tomb so they might anoint the body of their savior, their friend, their son, their brother, what they find instead is the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, save one dressed in white. They are alarmed, as each of us certainly would have been; and, yet, the messenger greets them with a word of peace, "Do not be alarmed. I know who you're looking for. You know that he has been crucified. You know that his body has been laid here, but he is not here. He has been raised." And the promise then from the lips of the young man, "He is going ahead of you. He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him. He is going ahead of you." That's what we get. We don't get the risen Jesus in the Gospel of Mark. All we get is a promise. "He is going ahead of you."

These words might be unsatisfactory to you, as they are often for me. I want the risen Jesus. I want Matthew. I want Luke. I want John. I don't care if he shows up as a gardener or on a road a little bit after the startled nature of the empty tomb. I don't even care if he meets me when I'm running away from that place. I just want to see him. And, yet, that is not what is offered by Mark. But what is offered by Mark is consistent with the way in which Mark describes Jesus. Jesus is the one who the disciples are to follow. This is important for us to know this morning. Audrey West teaches a critical piece of this gospel promise. She says "at the beginning of his ministry in Mark, in the Gospel of Mark, when Jesus... [*That was something! We hear lots of sounds in here. I haven't heard that one. Yeah, let's take that as a holy invitation to pay attention to what we're about to say right now, all right?*]" "At the beginning of his ministry, in the Gospel of Mark when Jesus calls his disciples, he invites them to quote "follow me." That's the translation in English, representing the Greek phrase to go or to come, which is *o piso mou*, *o piso mou*, which means to follow after me or behind me. This is the phrase that Jesus uses when he calls those first disciples. "Follow after me, follow behind me." It's the same Greek phrase that appears in this episode at Caesarea of Philippi when Peter is unable or unwilling to accept Jesus's passion prediction "Get *o piso mou*, Satan. Get behind me, Satan," Jesus says to Peter. Jesus commands, after which he immediately calls the crowd with his disciples and teaches all of them, "If anyone wants to follow me, *o piso mou*, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." Thus, from the beginning the proper place for a disciple of Jesus Christ is behind or after him, recalling always that Jesus is ahead, even when the early disciples or even when we are unable to see him."

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, April 20, 2025

---

I want the resurrected Jesus, but it turns out that these six words—they are a gift. *O pisa mou* is a holy invitation. It invites us into a different way of discipleship. I remember working as a hospital chaplain at Methodist Hospital in the medical center of Houston, Texas. I wasn't ordained yet. It was part of our ordination process. They gave us very little training and then told us to go and visit sick people in their hospital bedrooms. I remember every door that I approached that was closed. I would get more and more anxious, more and more nervous. My chest would get tight. I remember standing outside of those rooms before I knocked and feeling this tremendous pressure, because it was my sense that I was to bring the very presence of God with me into that space. Until one day by God's grace, I realized that I was not to carry the very presence of God with me into that space. I was simply to meet the resurrected God who was already in that room, caring for the one who was sick, caring for the one who is in need. A few years later, I'd read a prayer from one of my favorite authors, Justin McRoberts. He has a Lenten prayer book. The prayer is simply this. "May I have vision and courage to join God in the places God is already working, rather than feel responsible for bringing God with me."

*O pisa mou*. Follow me. Get behind me. So these six words can be for us a beautiful invitation, but scripture says that Mary Magdalene and Mary and Salome, they responded with terror and amazement. And that phrase—it sat with me this week, trying to figure out if this is indeed a holy invitation that Jesus...or a holy promise that Jesus is going ahead of them, in this specific instance, to Galilee. They're going to see him there. If it's indeed a holy invitation, why is their response terror and amazement? And by God's grace it struck me late this week that the terror and amazement that Mary Magdalene and Mary and Salome experienced that morning, it's similar to the terror and amazement that you feel on your wedding day. It's similar to the feeling of terror and amazement that you feel the first time you hold your newborn. It's one of those really important moments when it is undeniable that the moment is so much bigger than you, that that one emotion cannot meet that moment. It is equally terrifying and amazing, all at the same time. That is what they sit in on their Easter morning, and I think they know something. I think they know after they are told that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee—and that is indeed a physical place, but I think they will soon learn that Galilee, in this instance, is a standin for everywhere. That is that there is no place we can go, they can go, where Jesus has not already gone ahead for us. Every movement forward is a step into the unknown, but not for our Lord. Every place of uncertainty, every place of possibility, every place of temptation, every place of victory, every place of pain, every place of peace, every place of conflict, every place of disappointment, every place of joy, every place of loneliness, the living God goes ahead of us, the living God goes ahead of you. Christ goes with power. Christ goes with purpose. Sometimes Christ goes to clear a way in that place. Sometimes Christ goes to obstruct our way. Christ goes

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

---

The Reverend David J. Powers  
Sunday, April 20, 2025

---

to protect us. Christ goes to call us. And while I want to meet the risen Christ on this Easter morning, I'm becoming more and more settled into the gift of those six words. "He is going ahead of you."

Sometimes we simply need to know that Jesus goes ahead of us. Jesus goes ahead of us into parenting and into chemotherapy. He goes ahead of us into retirement, whether planned or thrust upon us. He goes ahead of us into that AA meeting or that counseling session. He goes ahead of us into that season of empty nesting. If we are a student he goes ahead of us into a new grade. I thought specifically this week about the young people who will lead us in worship next week, our youth and specifically our seniors who will proclaim, read and proclaim God's word to us. If you are a young person this day on the verge of graduating high school, it's important for you to know that Jesus goes ahead of you into college or to wherever it is you are going. Jesus goes ahead of you to Knoxville and to Oxford, to St Paul and to Winston Salem, to Easton and to Boston, to Spartanburg and to Colorado Springs; and even though it pains my Memphis heart, Jesus goes ahead of you to Nashville as well, although, more specifically, onto the Vanderbilt campus, all right? Jesus goes ahead of you. There's a gift and a power in those simple words.

They're more powerful than you might think actually. I remember as I was navigating the end of my sister's life, caregiving from afar and close by, I was lamenting to a friend of mine the difficulties of those days and what that looked like. This friend listened to my sadness and to my fear of what life was going to look like, not just for me but for my dad and our whole family. Anxiety that I had over planning her funeral, even preaching a homily there. I was sharing all these things with this friend over the phone, and they simply said to me after I was done, they said "Just tell me where you need me. Tell me what you need me to do and I will be there." This friend was offering to meet me in the place where I was going spiritually, emotionally, mentally, even physically, in that moment. They wanted to locate me and where I was on the map of my soul and let me know that when I got to that place they would already be there.

Sometimes all we need to know, all we need to know is that Jesus goes ahead of us. It turns out to be all that Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of James, and Salome needed to hear that morning. "He is going ahead of you. There you will see him." So this morning, beloved, I want you to know that Jesus is going ahead of you wherever you are traveling this day. Whatever season you find yourself in, Jesus is going ahead of you. Jesus is going ahead of you. Jesus is going ahead of you. Be assured that the place to which you are traveling—Christ is there. There you will see him. If Jesus goes ahead of us into death, can there be any doubt that he will be there ahead of us wherever life might take us?

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.