



Dear Friends,

Christ is risen!
He is risen indeed, hallelujah!

I hope that through Lent and Easter you've been able to make use of our printed materials or Zoom services. This year through Lent in one way or another we've been encouraged to take time to read the gospel of Mark and to appreciate the gospel story. If you managed to do that, I hope you found it a worthwhile exercise.

In Mark the first ten chapters tell the story of the three years of Jesus' ministry as he travels from Galilee to Jerusalem and the account is fast moving and exciting. In the last six chapters the pace of the story slows as he recounts the events surrounding the last week in the life of Jesus. Throughout the gospel Mark tends not to use many words when a few will do!

Mark's account of the first Easter is no different and it ends on a puzzling note (Mark 16:8). An empty tomb, a mysterious young man declaring that Jesus had been raised but offering little proof. The promise of Jesus going ahead to meet them in Galilee, and women who were so overwhelmed and afraid of what they found that they said nothing to anyone. In many ways it's a strange ending which fails to satisfy our curiosity. It's also an ending which does not stand too comfortably at the side of many of our Easter hymns, or even the other Gospel accounts. It is probably a sense of disappointment with the ending that resulted in what most scholars now agree is the later addition of the two alternative endings we find in our Bibles today. (Mark 16:8b and 9-20).

Mark 16:8 is an ending that lacks triumph and joy, but instead it appears to be shot through with confusion and terror. It's like the ending to a film that you've watched and been excited by, only to have the credits roll leaving you wanting to know more. It can't end there! What about so and so? How do they get out of that? What about the reaction of the disciples? What happens when Peter finds out?

As such, as the celebration of Easter fades into another year, we might have to admit that we still live in confusion and ambiguity. We desperately want the Gospel to end on a note of victory, but that was not the way Mark wanted to relate the truth of Jesus Christ. In

these days we know all too well through our own experience that the way of discipleship is not one continuous triumphant procession through the world, but it is rather more often punctuated by uncertainty. It may seem that Mark's Gospel ends on a pessimistic note because the women fail to report what they have seen and heard, but we need to remember that the Gospel is not about the failure of the disciples, rather it is about the power of God which overcomes human inadequacies. The ending of Mark reminds me that it is a Gospel that works through and in spite of human failure and doubt.

Many commentators have helpfully pointed out that as the Gospel of Mark ends we are encouraged to be a part of the on-going story. There is unfinished business, the baton has been passed on to us and we're encouraged to share the news - not in spite of our fear and doubting, but because of it! At this most special time of year, between Easter and Pentecost, may we be aware of the Son of God who shares our journey, and calls us to play our own particular part in the Gospel story.

The other big change for us in these days will be the final steps in the amalgamation of our three churches. The birth of West Craven Baptist Church is an exciting chapter in the story of Baptist witness in Craven and we are writing that story in these days. It's been a long and tortuous journey, and only achieved by the hard work and dedication of your leadership over recent years, but I'm now excited by the possibilities and I hope you are too! I look forward to serving you all as one of your ministers in this new church.

So, for us there is fresh hope in these strange and difficult days. As the vaccination program continues to roll out and as restrictions begin to ease, I pray that we will all discover the energy and motivation to meet together as West Craven Baptist Church in one way or another. But as restrictions are lifted your safety remains our prime concern when we're calling us together for worship. I'm sure that even as meeting together becomes possible it will take a while before we all feel able to return to our church buildings.

We can't be sure exactly what the future may look like for us as West Craven Baptist Church and there are numerous possibilities. It's unlikely to be the same as it was, but that can be exciting and it's up to us to create the 'new' together. Of course, I've never known life out of lockdown here and I'm certainly looking forward to being able to meet you all soon and to share this exciting journey together with you!

Happy Easter!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Stephen". The script is cursive and fluid, with the 'S' being particularly large and stylized.