



Forever Living Toward God's Promised Day

TEXT
Mark 1:1-8; 16:1-8

November 20, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Today we bring with us pledge commitments. Because of what the church has meant to us, to others we know and love, to a world that is beyond our walls — because of what the church has meant — we bring pledged commitments so that the church might continue to be the church tomorrow. These children that we baptize today are depending on us.

To think about that, I want us to reflect on Mark's gospel.

There is an aspect of Mark's gospel that I find compelling. And I want to point out a few small words that make a difference. When reading scripture, sometimes even the small words make all the difference.

I was reminded of this earlier this week as I was returning from a meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina. I arrived at my plane late to hear the announcement: "Anyone going to Kansas City needs to be on the plane now." I rushed to the counter with a couple other folks. The guy in front of me said to me, "You get on the plane if you want; I'm getting in the plane." Small words matter.

The very first word of the gospel is *arche*; it means "begin-

ning." We might think that Mark is saying, the *beginning* is the time with John the Baptist, or *beginning* is the time of Jesus' baptism and temptation before his ministry begins. But I think Mark uses that word *beginning* to describe the entire gospel. Why? Because Jesus is raised from the dead. If he is still alive, then Mark can't tell the entire story of Jesus because it continues still. He can only tell the beginning.

The Jesus story begins with John the Baptist, and Jesus' first words were about the kingdom of God — or as we say here, God's Promised Day. And from the time that Jesus opens his mouth, he begins moving at a frantic pace; everything happens immediately. Over and over again, things happen immediately, immediately. *Immediately* is Mark's favorite word. It's another small word, but very important. If you read the other gospels, Matthew uses *immediately* seven times, Luke only one time, and John three times — 11 times all together. Mark uses *immediately* 11 times in the first chapter; 42 times in total.

Why does this matter? Mark is telling us Jesus is always on the move. Jesus' followers are always struggling to keep up with him. He is always just ahead

of them. They struggle intellectually; they struggle in matters of the heart; they find Jesus constantly pulling them forward. And as soon as they think they have caught up, he has left the room again. He has gone ahead.

And so we should not be surprised when, at his resurrection, the word from the angel is: "He is not here; he has gone ahead of you." Of course he has. The church is always struggling to keep up with Jesus.

This makes so much sense to me. It seems to me the story of Village Church has been a story of trying to keep up with Jesus. He has gone ahead.

This congregation began when 282 saints came together March 4, 1949, and committed themselves to a future that only God could imagine. Dr. Bob, fresh from seminary, started walking the streets and knocking on doors and invited people to join a community that could make their lives better — and if we worked together, would make this city better. Who knew at the time that he would be an unparalleled leader?

Throughout the '50s, Village would care for one another and grow like a weed. Members were added and program was buzzing; mission was changing lives.

Music from the congregation would be plentiful and carry a quality found in few other places. It looked for all the world that we figured out what it meant to be the church here. And then we turned around to discover “he has gone ahead of us.” Jesus had left the room.

It was the 1960s, and unrest was all around us. Civil rights and Vietnam called the church to recognize that how we treated our neighbor was a spiritual matter. That treatment could not be limited to simply being polite. It requires justice. The matters of racism are more than just how we talk about one another. As important as our speech is, it is how we treat one another; it is about opportunity and the lack thereof.

There was courage in this pulpit in those days. More than a few decided Village was no longer the church for them. But Henry Sewing and his family moved into Fairway. Dr. Bob knocked on their door, like he had so many others, promising that they would be welcome here.

Village would contribute \$100,000 to the Black Motivational Training Center — a name that reflects its time, but a mission that demonstrated you were striving to keep up with Jesus, who had clearly gone ahead of us. You were leaders, standing tall in a difficult time.

And as soon as we felt we had found our footing there, we looked around and discovered that Jesus had gone ahead of us again.

In the 1970s, Pat Jackard would become “the queen of

Singles Ministry,” ministering to thousands of single adults in this area. It was here that safe and generous friendships could be made and nourished.

But then, we discovered that Jesus had gone ahead of us again. Village would discover again that discipleship of Jesus Christ requires care for the poor. So of course, Village would be the church of the food pantry and of Front Porch Alliance. Village would support the health clinic in Kansas City and the hospital in La Romana, Dominican Republic.

You would open your doors and your extra bedrooms when Katrina left people with their worlds washed away. Village is a church of mission on Mission Road. It is just who we are.

But you would also recognize that our energy for mission grew from our knowledge of faith and from our care for one another. From our first days, this congregation would care for one another. You would also be the church to one another, celebrating in times of joy and sharing in times of sorrow.

Raise your hand if you were married here. Raise your hand if you had a child baptized here. Raise your hand if you have attended a memorial service here. I think there is a connection between the love we share out there and the love we practice in here.

So as Village sought to be Village, you embraced the Now & Tomorrow Campaign. You have made this sanctuary a holy place for generations to come.

Children by the thousands will be loved and set in a strong

start in their lives because of this campaign.

New means of mission are in front of us because of this campaign.

So we might say, you know that at Village, things are good. Things are good at Village Presbyterian Church — you might say that. I think you would be right. Things are good here. Because I think that, it makes me wonder if Jesus has left the room. He’s gone ahead of us.

Let me share with you what our Session is praying about. Yesterday the Session — our church leaders — had a Session retreat, and they are asking if there is a new mission possibility before us.

In our Now & Tomorrow Campaign, we reminded ourselves of the first congregational meeting of this congregation, when 282 people voted to give \$25,000 to start a new congregation. The Presbyterian denomination had invested thousands of dollars into this church to get it off the ground, so Village wanted to repay the debt.

Village participated in starting a number of other congregations: Leawood, Rolling Hills and Grace Covenant — and most recently, Neema.

In the Now & Tomorrow Campaign, we remembered this first decision and said it is again time for us to start a new congregation.

Well, it seems that God has been the source of that dream. Stanley Presbyterian Church, located at 148th and Antioch, has asked us to partner with them and

to plant a satellite of Village in their building.

Why? Stanley has gone through a painful split. Some folks, primarily upset by our denomination's welcome of the LGBT community, have split the church and joined another denomination.

But about 100 members of that congregation have stayed. They have been persistent. They have been courageous. They have sacrificed that there might be a gracious, thoughtful, compassionate, inclusive witness to Jesus Christ in that community. But they know that they need a partner. And they have invited us to create a satellite of our congregation in their church building.

It would be called "Village on Antioch." We would become one congregation that worships in two locations. We already worship in four different hours; if we are able to move forward with this, we will worship in two locations. We have never done that before, but we wonder if Jesus has gone ahead of us and is leading us in this direction.

The Session is doing the hard work of prayer, of discernment. But we also know you need to tell us your thoughts. It will cost us about \$250,000 the first year, a little less the next and the next, about \$600,000 over three years. By then, the satellite should be strong enough to carry the demand of that ministry. \$600,000 is a lot of money, but it is a pretty insignificant investment to begin a whole new congregation.

There was a time when Village was the second largest congregation in the Presbyterian

Church, with over 7,700 members. We are just under 5,000 now. I don't think we will get to 7,700 again — not here. The growth of the city has moved past us. 83rd Street is not "out south" anymore.

But what if we worked and labored to plant another place where people could be Village; where they could experience the same love of God and love of one another; the same commitment to reason and the same sacrifice for mission?

If we are one church in two places, we would grow. And it's not growth for growth's sake. No, it's growth so that more people can be reminded every week that they are welcomed by the love of God, and there is no power that can pull them from that love; so that more people, just like us, can be reminded that God's holy love sends us out into a world that is beautiful but broken; so that we go out to live his love in all that we say and do, forever living toward God's promised day.

That day has not come yet, which is why he has gone ahead of us. But when he goes ahead of us, it is never to leave us behind. No! He goes ahead, but he looks over his shoulder and encourages: "Come on. Come on, get closer."

What I have learned about you: You will do everything you can to catch up.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.