

Easter Sunday
April 1, 2018

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Mark 16:1-8
Easter and the Death of Fear

Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed.



Resurrection of Christ, Ed DeGusman, contemporary

I want to say a special welcome to everyone worshipping with us today over in Zimmerman Hall and with us by Livestream. We are not all in the same room today, but we are together in the same Spirit. Welcome.

Let's pray together:

God of endless surprise, on that first Easter morning you startled Jesus' friends with his unexpected resurrection. Surprise us again today with the great good news of your power and love. Death is destroyed. Now love, not fear reigns forever. Break through the aridness of our doubt today. Shine the bright light of your glory upon us, we pray. Amen.

Mark's story of Easter begins in darkness -- three terrified women creeping through the night to a tomb that has been sealed with an enormous stone. How would they move it? Anointing his body was a key part of their funeral ritual; it was also their duty and privilege as his closest friends. But how would they get in to the tomb? What about the guards? What if they were caught?

Mark's story of Easter is marinated in fear. These women had watched their friend die on Friday afternoon; it was a cruel death, a public death, another brown man strung up for violating the status quo. Everyone who watched it knew that. The women knew it because they had stayed with him, even after all the other disciples fled.

I don't know why they stayed. Maybe it was because they could. Women were barely noticed in those days. Maybe they stayed because they remembered Galilee.

Everything had been so different in Galilee. They followed him as he taught there, walked beside him, and watched as huge crowds gathered around to listen to him teach. They'd seen him do what nobody else would do -- touch lepers, eat with the riff-raff. He talked with women, held children in his lap, restored sight, healed the sick. He was a phenom and they'd followed him throughout Galilee, all the way to Jerusalem.

Now it was Passover and the holiday crowds had cheered and welcomed him as Messiah. They waved palm branches and called him Lord and King. Salome, Mary and Mary Magdalene were

with him all through that dizzying week as he taught in the temple. With every day that passed the opposition to him hardened and strategized. At dinner on Thursday night he broke bread and gave it to them and said, "Take and eat this; it is my body broken for you."ⁱ He took wine and poured, and blessed it and said, "This is my blood of the covenant that is poured out for you."ⁱⁱ

Later that night, while he was out praying in the garden, an angry mob surrounded him. Roman soldiers arrested him, tried him in a kangaroo court and sentenced him to death. Everything had gone terribly wrong! The disciples – Peter, James, John and the others did what any sane person would do; they ran and hid wherever they could.

But Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome, stayed. They watched as he was stretched out, nailed to a cross and hung up to die. By sundown on Friday, all the life had gone out of the one who had been their life for these past three years.

Then Joseph from Arimathea, a good man, a respected member of the Jewish community, claimed the body and laid it in his own tomb. Again Mary Magdalene, Mary and Salome were there. They watched as his shrouded body was placed there and a huge stone was pressed on the entrance.

Then they waited. All day on Saturday, the Sabbath, a quiet day. Nothing stirred. No one was working; the shops were closed. They waited for the first slip of sunlight to slide past the horizon. Then the three grabbed their baskets of oils and spices and set out for the tomb. The biblical account is spare here; there is little detail. All Mark has to say is that they needn't have worried about how they would move that stone. Even the thin light revealed that the stone had already been rolled back.

I don't know many people who would have the nerve to walk right into an open tomb – especially one that held a body that had been dead for three days -- but these three didn't hesitate. Once inside they were startled to see a young man in all white sitting in the place where the corpse should have been. Fearless then...now...they are terrified!

The first thing the young man said is what angels always say to humans...

"Don't be afraid." How can they not? They watched Jesus die. They saw his body taken down from the cross and placed there in that tomb. And now it was gone! He's loose. He's left the grave. He is loose in the world. I tell you every Easter about Scott Black Johnston, the former pastor of the church where I grew up, and his strange Easter custom. Every year on Easter, sometime during the day, Scott's phone rings. When he answers, the voice on the other end of the line will say, "He's loose; Jesus is loose!" Then hangs up. He knows who it is; it's his seminary roommate's strange and wonderful way of saying "Happy Easter."

And it is perfectly true. Jesus is not in the grave. He is gone! It's like that scene at the end of *The Sound of Music* when the young Nazi soldier suddenly realizes the Von Trapp family has slipped their grasp, and announces, "They're gone!"

Jesus is loose. Death could not hold him.

He mentioned that something like this might happen. “I’m going to destroy this temple and after three days raise it up again.” He’d said that. Still the women were terrified. If there was anything they knew, anything we all know for certain, it is that dead means dead. Dead means finished, over. If dead people aren’t going to stay dead, then what can you count on?

For a long time the women just stood there, frozen in fear. I’ve read that paralysis is a typical response to fear. First we freeze, then we either fight or flee.ⁱⁱⁱ If we think that we can take it, we will stand and fight, otherwise we will run.

A lot of years ago, when our children were preschoolers, we had just moved to Florida. It was a sunny April afternoon. (All of them are.) I set out a picnic for the children on a blanket in the backyard. We were enjoying our little tea party when I saw something moving in my peripheral vision. I spun around and found myself staring straight into the eyes of a 10-foot alligator. It was slinking its way toward us in the way they do! I was terrified, paralyzed with fear. When I finally found my voice, I shouted to the children to “get inside the house.” Five-year-old Rachel did exactly as she was told, but two-year-old Sarah said what all two-year-olds always say when told to do something... “No!” I scooped her up, held her like a package under my arm, and made a run for the house. Then I grabbed the phone and dialed 911.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“There’s an alligator in my backyard,” I was gasping for breath.

“Yeah, and...”

“An alligator!”

“You’re not from around here, are you?”

The dispatcher went on to explain that it was mating season so “the gators were on the move,” but not to worry, “they hardly ever go after people.” I hung up the phone wondering how many two-year-olds are in a “hardly ever.”

Terror. Paralysis. When the women finally collect their thoughts they “flee from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them.” They run—of course they run-- but not before they receive some important instructions. The young man in the tomb – was he an angel? He tells the women:

“Do not be afraid.”

It’s not as if there is nothing to fear. We know death’s power all too well. There are diseases that can steal our health and our loved ones. Terrorists attacks; peddlers and politicians play on our fears to manipulate us. There are even some reptiles that we ought to avoid. The Palestinian Christians who were attacked by Israeli soldiers during their Palm Sunday parade last Sunday understand that there is plenty to fear.^{iv} The Easter message is not that fear is ridiculous or unnecessary. The good news of Easter is that there is a power greater than our fear. Resurrection power!

Our little granddaughter is just learning to walk. She has no fear. She will pull up on anything, whether it is stable or not; she's driven to exercise those newfound muscles in her legs. To her, standing is true liberation! When she falls, and she constantly falls, one of us is there to gather her up and kiss her. "It's okay" we tell her, but what we really mean is, "We are here for you. We will watch over and guard you. Our love is all around you."

Jesus told his disciples that same thing as he was preparing to leave them. He said,

"You will face many trials; but have courage; I have overcome the world!"^v

What would it be like if we adults truly had no fear? In the early days of Christianity, around 250 AD there was a pandemic that spread across the Mediterranean from Alexandria to Rome killing as many as 5,000 people a day. Some have suggested that the disease was a Viral Hemorrhagic Fever, but Cyprian, the Bishop of Carthage wrote that he believed it was God's apocalypse, the end of the world.^{vi}

Those who could left the cities as the cases of the disease multiplied, but the Christians -- many of whom were low income people and slaves -- believed that Jesus was there with them—that he was risen, loose in the world and moving among them. Those Christians stayed in the cities and ministered to the sick. Some of them died. Those who survived were astounded to see that tens of thousands of those who had received their care converted to the faith of Jesus.^{vii}

"Do not be afraid." Jesus did not put an end to fear, instead he overcame it -- all those things that terrify us -- they're still there. Emerson famously said, "Do the thing you fear and the death of fear is certain." If it were only that easy.

Two thousand years after Mary, Salome and Mary Magdalene went to the tomb on that morning that changed the world forever, we've come bringing our own hopes. It's impossible not to be drawn to the story, drawn to its hope, drawn to the one who said, "Come to me all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest"^{viii} -- The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

The angel told Mary, Mary Magdalene and Salome not to be afraid. Then he gave them a second instruction. He said,

"Go. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, and there you will see him." Where's Galilee? It's where they live, where they raised their children and earning their living, where they paid their taxes, where they lived and loved. Galilee was home.

The angels told the women to go tell Peter and the others to "Go home. That's where they will see the risen Christ.

In her book called, *Things Seen and Unseen*, journalist Nora Gallagher tells about how a friend she loves, named Ann, comes to believe in the resurrection rather suddenly. It's during a time in Ann's life when she is struggling with depression. She's afraid, afraid of a lot of things, but mostly afraid for her children. She thinks the choices they are making are leading to disaster.

Ann inherited a rigid kind of faith from her parents. She has not given up on the teachings of the church altogether, but trying to reconcile the pain in her own family, and the chaos of the world with her faith, has become a struggle.

Then one day, Ann “was sitting on a Trailways bus heading into Washington, D.C., when she looked up from the book she was reading, and she believed in the resurrection. She was reading a devotional book, and looking out the window at the telephone poles and trees zipping by.” Ann told her friend Nora: “When I came to the words in the Creed, ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,’ I don’t know what happened; I let my guard down, I guess. I really believed it completely in an instant. I mean I knew without a doubt that it was true. It was just enough to allow me to let go of my terrible fear, to see the goodness in my children, and to believe in their potential for good.”

Ann told Nora: “The resurrection means that nothing is hopeless anymore.”^{ix}

I think that’s a good way to look at it. Because he lives, because he meets us where we are, because he’s loose in the world, nothing is hopeless anymore.

The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

ⁱ 1 Corinthians 11:24

ⁱⁱ Mark 14:22-24

ⁱⁱⁱ *The Conversation*, “Paralyzed with fear: why do we freeze when frightened?” June 13, 2016

^{iv} <http://www.palestinechronicle.com/israeli-soldiers-attack-palestinian-christians-palm-sunday-procession/>
<http://imemc.org/article/pa-denounces-israeli-police-assault-on-palm-sunday-celebration/>

^v John 16:33

^{vi} Kyle Harper “Solving the Mystery of the Ancient Roman Plague” *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2017

^{vii} Caroline Wazer “The Plagues That Might Have Brought Down the Roman Empire” *The Atlantic*, March 16, 2016

^{viii} Matthew 11:28

^{ix} Nora Gallagher, *Things Seen and Unseen*, 134 as quoted in a sermon by Agnes Norfleet preached at the Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church, Bryn Mawr, PA, April 5, 2015