

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Mark 16: 1-8
“The Realest Story Ever Told”
Resurrection of the Lord
April 5, 2015

Christmas wouldn't be Christmas without Charlie Brown and the Grinch on the TV schedule, I suppose. And Easter wouldn't be Easter without "The Greatest Story Ever Told." Indeed, you can catch the "epic retelling of the life of Jesus Christ" at 4:30 this afternoon on Turner Classic Movies, something to fill up the lull between today's holiday brunch and tomorrow night's NCAA basketball finals.

Our Scripture lesson this morning, Mark's account of Jesus's resurrection, unlike "The Greatest Story Ever Told," is far from epic in its telling. The story doesn't feature any big stars...even Jesus himself doesn't make an appearance. It doesn't boast thousands of extras and countless crew members.

It is mostly a story about three women, three women whose life experience while separated from our life experience by two millennia feels very real to people like you and me who try to make sense of life and faith when an unexpected, unplanned-for event slams us to the ground and pummels the breath out of us and we know in that split second that life as we know it will never be the same.

For the next twenty minutes of so, I invite you to slip into the sandals of Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome and try them on for size. As you listen to the story from this vantage point, see if you don't agree that Mark's Easter story is the realest story ever told.

These were three strong women...Mary, Mary, and Salome.

A few verses earlier (Mark 15: 41), Mark had explicitly named these women and wrote that they along with another woman named Mary and "many other women" had "followed" Jesus and "provided" for him during his ministry in Galilee. The verbs that are used in that earlier verse suggest that it would not be stretching it to call these women "disciples" in the fullest sense of the word. (1) In the patriarchal society that was first-century Palestine, they had what it took to lean into the challenges that life on the road with Jesus would have presented.

And not only did they live with Jesus and share his ministry. They stood by him when he died. Judas betrayed Jesus. Peter denied him. When Jesus exhaled his last breath, not one of the Twelve was anywhere to be seen. But these women, these strong women named Mary, Mary, and Salome...they showed up and they stayed.

Mary, Mary, and Salome. Strong women. When I think of them, I think of Rosa Parks, defying a white bus driver when he demanded that she give up her seat on the bus and in so doing, putting her very life into rolling away the huge stone of racial inequality that governed, well, just about everything that was life in Montgomery, Alabama, in her day. When I think of them, I think of Maya Angelou, abused as a child, mute for almost five years, and then emerging from her tomb of silence to bless the world through her extraordinary use of language. When I think of them, I think of two women who are not as well-known to you, perhaps, but who have exerted a marked influence upon me because of the ways that they put their shoulders to the huge stones that stood between women in the Presbyterian Church and the vocation of ordained ministry: Rachel Henderlite, who zigzagged her way along an educational path that was interrupted first by a bout with tuberculosis and then again when she took time out to care for her ailing father, but who persevered and became the first woman ordained as a minister by the denomination that would ordain me 15 years later, and Catherine Gonzalez, the first woman professor at Columbia Seminary and thus the first woman I had ever heard preach because, you see, until I entered seminary myself in 1975, I had never, ever heard a woman preach. I'm still not half the preacher that she is, but the very fact that I heard her preach made it impossible for me not to consider the possibility that God was calling me to preach too.

Mary, Mary, and Salome. Strong women. Women who were not deterred at all by the fact that there was a big—a VERY big--stone standing between them and Jesus's body. As devastatingly sad as they were at Jesus's death, as hard as the previous few days had been, they were strong. They would figure something out.

But then...

Well, here is where the story gets really real.

The stone is rolled away. The tomb is open.

A young man says that Jesus is not here. (He is not an angel, did you notice?...so maybe it was no more out of the ordinary than when I say to Rhonda or Julie when I leave the church office, if anybody calls, tell them, I'm not here...only, of course, it is A WHOLE LOT different because Jesus had died, for heaven's sake, and I've just gone to Subway to get a sandwich.)

And the women's reaction: depending on the translation that one is reading, they are "startled," "alarmed," "afraid." Yes, they are all of the above, and more.

It's worth unpacking what Mary, Mary, and Salome were feeling and expressing. It's worth slowing down the story to recall times in our own lives when something unexpected (2) has socked you in the solar plexus and knocked whatever it is that is your definition of *strong* right out of you.

You walk into a meeting expecting nothing more notable than your usual six-month performance review, but it turns out to be a great deal more because you are told, "the decision has been made to close this branch, and, by the way, there is not another place for you in the company."

The phone rings. It's your kid. And he isn't calling from school where you had dropped him off that morning. He is calling from jail.

Chip Hayner, the son of Columbia Seminary president Steve Hayner who died this past January, wrote in a Facebook posting on Friday, "Good Friday 2014. The next morning, papa would complain of some pain in his abdomen, and 3 days later we found out it was cancer. This [picture] was of the last evening before our lives changed forever."

If you have lived long enough, you will have your own story to tell of the day when real life turned you upside down like a salt shaker and shook the *strong* right out of you and, yes, perhaps, your life was changed forever.

This is real life, and, interestingly, real life is precisely where Mark leaves us. The risen Christ is nowhere to be seen. There is no scene of the resurrected Jesus confronting his followers' fear and doubt and calling forth their faith. The last line of Mark's gospel reads: "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."

On the one hand, there is something deeply awkward and unsatisfying about Mark's concluding sentence. There is something in us that longs for a Disneyesque "happily ever after" ending, isn't there.

But on the other hand, "happily ever after" isn't real life.

And what Mark offers us this Easter is a simple invitation and a simple promise, an invitation and a promise which are experienced most fully and most powerfully when we are not feeling powerful and in control, but when something has happened and we know in that split second that our lives are changed forever and we are scared as scared can be right down to the tingling tips of our toes.

Here is the invitation and the promise of the realest story ever told for the real lives that you and I lead: He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.

He is going ahead of you into Galilee, Galilee being the place where these followers of Jesus lived. It was nowhere special. It was Davidson, Huntersville, Cornelius, Mooresville, Charlotte. It's where we live our real lives. The risen Christ is already there. He has gone ahead of us. And there, by the mercy of God, we are given the grace to see him.

Let me tell you how this has happened just this past week and is continuing to happen even now in the Galilee that stretches from Houston, Texas, to Davidson, NC, to San Antonio, Texas.

On Monday morning, I received a phone call from my brother Jimmy. Jimmy is on the staff of a Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas. He told me that early Monday morning, just after midnight, 5 first-year students at Trinity University in San Antonio were involved in an automobile accident. One student died; the other four were critically injured. The driver of the car, Claire Alford, is the daughter of Mendy and John Alford. Mendy is the director of music at the Houston church where my brother serves, and he was calling me because I served as the pastor of University Presbyterian Church in San Antonio adjacent to Trinity University for the 15 years prior to my becoming pastor here. He hoped that I could reach out to the pastor and congregation there so that they might offer some support for the Alford family who had received that early morning phone call that no parent wants to receive, the phone call that in a split second has changed their lives.

Of course, I said that I would. But before I did that, I asked the intercessory prayer group here at Davidson College Presbyterian Church to pray for the students and their families, for Stephen Nickle, the chaplain at Trinity, for

David Tuttle, the Dean of Students, and the whole Trinity community as they deal with a tragedy that hits close to home for us because, of course, it is no stretch for us to imagine how easily a similarly terrible and unthinkable tragedy could happen here and shake our own campus community to its very core.

On Friday, Kelly Allen, the pastor at University Presbyterian Church, texted me this message: Just came from hospital. Long visit with Claire's father John. They are being surrounded. May be at UPC Easter am. Met mother of other student in ICU. So thankful and receptive to visit. Families are all really connecting and caring for each other. Had a thought as I heard John talking to a Trinity graduate who works at the hospital. He was talking about all the amazing connections with people and how it was as if people were already there, in place, to be the community for them. I am thinking of how that relates to the news that Jesus had gone ahead of you to Galilee.

On the front of our worship bulletin every Sunday, the Davidson College Presbyterian vision statement appears. It begins, we are the body of Christ. It doesn't read, we will be the body of Christ one day. It reads, We are the body of Christ, meaning, we are the body of the risen Christ right now, right here in real life, right here in the Galilee where we live.

And the great and delicious mystery of Mark's Easter invitation and promise is that sometimes we get to experience the risen body of Christ ministering to us and sometimes we get to be the body of Christ ministering to others. And often, it happens that we experience Christ's ministry to us and our ministry to others at one and the same time.

Or it may look like families connecting and caring for each other in an ICU waiting room in San Antonio.

Or it may look like followers of Jesus in a congregation located on one college campus praying for a campus community half a continent away—as we pray today for the family of Corey Burns, the student who died in the Trinity accident, for Claire Alford who has undergone multiple surgeries and remained unconscious and in critical, but stable, condition as of Friday, and her parents Mendy and John, for the other students Andrew Harrington, Hannah Ventola, and Sarah Billman and their families.

It is a good thing, it is good news, brothers and sisters, that Mark left off telling his story of Jesus's resurrection where he did. Hear his open ending as a personal invitation to you to jump in and to take your part in continuing the realest story ever told.

1. John R. Donahue, S.J., and Daniel J. Harrington, S.J., *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002), 449.
2. Martha Spong, "Living the Word," *The Christian Century*, April 1, 2015, 18.