

Ahead of Us

Mark 16:1-8

Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009

Whitefish UMC

- † Easter begins with fear—in Mark’s gospel anyway. None of the poignant conversations between the risen Jesus and Mary Magdalene or the other women are found in this spare and rather unsatisfactory Easter story.
- † And yet because Mark’s gospel is the earliest and most unembellished of the accounts, we have to pay attention to it. Why then, does Mark’s original ending conclude not with unabashed joy, but with terror and silence?
- † Early in the morning, three women approach the tomb bearing precious herbs and oils to wash the body of their Lord. They have come to comb out Jesus’ hair, to sponge away the dried blood, to massage precious myrrh into his skin. It’s the least they can do for him, now.
- † They have come to anoint the crucified one. In the midst of conversation about the practical details of their mission of care, they find a rolled-away stone. And the tomb is empty—vacant, except for some young person who is definitely not Jesus.
- † And suddenly, they are afraid. They fear that they have lost their last chance to honor the one in whom they put their hope, the one who welcomed them as disciples along with the men. Could this be some cruel joke? Is this young man a Roman guard who wants to take one last shot at mocking their Lord and their friend?

- † Instead the young man tells them something absolutely astonishing: “He is not here. Don’t be alarmed. He has been raised. Go and tell the disciples.” But instead of running to tell as he asks, they are struck dumb—unable to speak of what they have seen—perhaps unable to believe what they have been told.
- † It’s such an unsatisfactory ending to this momentous event that there is evidence that over the next few centuries, scribes who were copying the text kept adding on to it, embellishing it so it would conform to later accounts and be more literarily complete.
- † But the original ending makes sense to me. The women, first witnesses to the resurrection, were shocked, terrified, stunned into silence. That feels authentic, because it’s just how you and I might have reacted.
- † In some ways, Easter is still rendering us speechless and tongue-tied. I love a story that the humorist David Sedaris tells in his book, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. He is in Paris, taking a French class for foreigners, and the teacher is helping them to learn about holidays.
- † After first talking haltingly about Bastille Day, the class made up that day of an Italian nanny, a plump Moroccan woman, two Polish men, and the American, moved on to discuss Easter.
- † “And what does one do on Easter? Would anyone like to tell us?” asked the teacher. The Italian nanny was attempting to answer the questions when the Moroccan student interrupted, shouting, “Excuse me, but what’s an Easter?”
- † “I mean it,” she said. “I have no idea what you people are talking about.” The teacher called on the rest of them to explain. The Poles

- led the charge to the best of their ability. “It is,” said one, “a party for the little boy of God who call self Jesus and...oh ‘shoot’.”
- † He faltered, and his fellow countryman came to his aid. “He call his self Jesus, and then he die one day on two...morsels of...lumber.”
- The rest of the class jumped in, offering bits of information that would have given the pope an aneurysm, Sedaris says.
- † “He die one day, and then he go above my head to live with your father.” He weared the long hair, and after he died, the first day he come back here for to say hello to the peoples.” “He nice, the Jesus.”
- † “He make the good things, and on the Easter we be sad because somebody makes him dead today.” Part of the problem, Sedaris says, had to do with grammar. Simple nouns such as cross and resurrection were beyond our grasp, let alone such complex reflexive phrases as “To give of yourself your only begotten son.”
- † Faced with the challenge of explaining the cornerstone of Christianity, we did what any self-respecting group of people might do. We talked about food instead. And on goes Sedaris to recount a hilarious conversation about lamb, chocolate, and who brings it. It turns out in France it’s a big bell that flies in from Rome.
- † Yes, Easter is indeed almost beyond our telling, even in our native language. Silence, then, makes some sense. And yet the word did get out, somehow. Because this band of speechless, fearful followers suddenly changed into an energetic body of effective witnesses—spreading their faith, firmly offering the claim that Jesus lives.
- † How can this be? Ultimately, Easter is not so much about the telling as it is about the living. For what touches us on Easter is that deep

- place in our souls where we decide who we will be, how we will live, whom we will trust.
- † What transformed cowards into brave disciples was the conviction that Jesus Christ was alive and therefore there was absolutely no reason to be afraid anymore. “Do not be afraid, do not be alarmed” were the first words spoken to the women at the tomb.
 - † Fear not, fear nothing, fear not even death or dying or losing yourself. What transformed the disciples is the same truth that raises up brave men and women to live and witness in the face of danger—Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King—our brave highway patrol officers—and millions of others who live with courage and conviction in the face of illness, depression, the losses that go along with aging, and of course death.
 - † What is this truth? The conviction that Jesus Christ is risen today, and the trust that Love is stronger than death.
 - † But how can we, too, find that truth, that conviction, and live not only as if but because it is so? I think the answer lies in the next line spoken by the young man, the angel at the tomb.
 - † “Go,” the angel told the startled women on Easter morning. “He is going ahead of you—to Galilee; there you will see him.” And that, today, is God’s word to us this Easter morning. Go, he is going ahead of us. He has gone into the darkness for us; he has gone into suffering and death. And that’s not all there is. There is resurrection ahead—life ahead.
 - † But what does this mean? That there is life after death in Him? Yes, but ultimately the real meaning of Easter is not about what happens when we die. It is more geared to how we live now, in this life—so

beautiful, so amazing, so painful, so frustrating—sometimes all at once.

- † This Easter, what are we afraid of? Perhaps it's our financial future, our health or the well-being of those we love, of what will become of us. As one writer says, "Are we afraid (after the pageantry and the glorious music) that we will return to life unchanged—untouched?"
- † Are we afraid that we will retire to an afternoon brunch among the azaleas without seeing God? Are we really afraid that we will find the tomb empty? Or are we afraid of the possibility, however slim we consider it to be, that God is out there and will meet us on this day? Are we afraid that God is waiting for us? Perhaps we should be."
(Johnston)
- † Because if Jesus is waiting on down the road in Galilee, you can bet he has plans for us. Undoubtedly he will ask things of us, the same way he challenged his first followers—thoroughly messing up their ordinary lives.
- † Is this the morning that the living God will grab us by the scruff of our deepest selves to propel us into a transformed future of hope and possibility for God's kingdom to really come on earth as it is in heaven?
- † And maybe that's what scares us, overwhelms us. Sure, we love Jesus; we go to church, at least once in a while. But do we really want God to mess with us, to make demands on us, to cost us anything?
- † Instead of leaving us politely alone, what if God were a part of our career plans, our politics, our way of doing business, our relationships? Do we want Jesus to just stay where he belongs (a kindly figure who watches over the sweet dreams of children)?

- † What if, by going before us into our lives and our world, he is hungering for us to show up for the resurrection? That sort of Jesus is more than enough to make a person afraid. “If he is not cold on the slab, if he is raised, well, then, to quote Flannery O’Connor, ‘He’s thrown everything off balance!’”
- † Because, as N. T. Wright says in his wonderful new book, *Surprised by Hope*, Easter is about new creation, a huge and stunning fresh gift of transforming grace...with Easter God’s new creation is launched upon a surprised world, pointing ahead to the renewal, the redemption, the rebirth of the entire creation.
- † And so every act of love, every deed done in Christ and by the Holy Spirit, every work of true creativity—doing justice, making peace, healing families, resisting temptation, seeking and winning true freedom—is an earthly event. pointing to the resurrection of Jesus.
- † More than that, these acts of love and mercy and compassion implement Jesus’ own resurrection and anticipate the final new creation in which the kingdom of God is completed on earth as it is in heaven.
- † Think about it. How you live in this life, in your family, your workplace, your community, our world turns Jesus’ resurrection into reality, by the power of God’s spirit.
- † It’s enough to render us speechless, in awe and yes, even in fear of the possibilities within us.
- † Back to the humorist David Sedaris and his struggle to communicate the resurrection. He concludes with these observations, in part:
- † *Nothing we said was of any help to the Moroccan student. A dead man with long hair supposedly living with her father, a leg of lamb*

- served with palm fronds and chocolate. Confused and disgusted, she shrugged her massive shoulders and turned her attention back to the comic book she kept hidden under her binder.*
- † *I wondered then, if without the language barrier, my classmates and I could have done a better job making sense of Christianity, an idea that sounds pretty far-fetched to begin with. In communicating any religious belief, the operative word is faith, a concept illustrated by our very presence in that classroom.*
- † *Why bother struggling with the grammar lessons of a six year old if each of us didn't believe that, against all reason, we might eventually improve? If I could hope one day to carry on a fluent conversation, it was a relatively short leap to believing that a rabbit might visit my home in the middle of the night, leaving behind a handful of chocolate kisses.... So why stop there?*
- † *If I could believe in myself, why not give other improbabilities the benefit of the doubt? I accepted the idea that an omniscient God had cast me in his own image and that he watched over me and guided me from one place to the next.*
- † *The virgin birth, the resurrection, and the countless miracles—my heart expanded to encompass all the wonders and possibilities of the universe.*
- † *Because of Easter, you can care passionately; you can love without reservation. You can give your life to your dearest ones, the causes you care most about. You can give your life to justice, to peace, to church, to God's kingdom on earth.*
- † *“Go,” the angel said. The risen Jesus will be there. Having faced the worst that could happen to him, Jesus goes on ahead of us into*

resurrection life. Whatever lies ahead, Jesus is there, wounds and scars still visible, but beckoning us to follow him into a future of hope and justice and love.

† This Easter morning, and every day, live into his risen life!

† Christ in risen, risen indeed! Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

David Sedaris, *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, 2000.

Dr. Scott Black Johnston, “Deadly Things,” <http://day1.org>

N. T. Wright, *Surprised By Hope*, 2008.

John Buchanan, “In Our End is Our Beginning,” <http://fourthchurch.org>