

## SERMON

EASTER DAY – YEAR B

“WE ARE EASTER PEOPLE”

MARK 16:1-8 / APRIL 1, 2018

*Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.*

Easter begins with fear. At least that’s the way Mark tells it. It’s not that Easter begins with wild panic – no, not that. Easter begins with the kind of fear that feels a lot like heart-break. It begins with a twist in your stomach that comes when the phone rings and you hear the voice of a relative. “are you sitting down?” That kind of fear.

Early in the morning, three women approach the tomb bearing precious herbs and oils to wash the body of Jesus. They have come to comb out his hair, to sponge away the dried blood, to massage precious myrrh into his skin. They hope to engage in this ritual act, this act of care, that is traditionally done before sealing a body in the tomb. They have come to anoint the crucified one. Yet, even as they discuss how they will gain access to the tomb, after all, it is blocked by a massive boulder, they find that the stone has already been rolled away.

The tomb is empty – vacant, except for some young fellow who is definitely not Jesus; and suddenly they are afraid. They fear that their last chance to pour a little compassion on the broken body of Jesus has escaped. They

fear that they are witnessing the final insult of this whole horrible affair. First, Jesus' life is stolen, and now, even his body has been taken. And, perhaps, they also fear... no, they simply must fear, that death has won. Death, the ever-ravenous monster, has finally, and utterly, swallowed up their beloved friend.

Easter begins with fear. Sensing the distress of the three women, the young man in a white robe offers some surprising news as a comfort to them. "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

This is, of course, the Easter proclamation. He has been raised; he is not here. The stone is rolled back. The tomb is empty. This is holy comfort at its best. So why are the women still afraid?

After hearing the young man's pronouncement, Mark tells us that the two Marys and Salome "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them." What were they afraid of now? Did they fear that the message from the man in white was a lie? Were they afraid that they were duped by a Roman guard who was having a bit of sick fun at their expense? Or was it something altogether different? Could it be that they were afraid that the mind-bending report that they had just heard was true? "He has been raised."

Now, how might that stir up fear?

To answer that, we might want to consider our own fears this Easter day. Are we afraid that after the pageantry and the glorious music, we will return to life unchanged – untouched? Are we afraid that we will retire to an afternoon brunch without feeling the joy of the Easter event? Or is it possible that we are ‘really’ afraid that we, too, will find the tomb empty? That however slim we consider that possibility to be, that God is out there in the world and will meet us this day or tomorrow or the next? Are we afraid that God is waiting for us? Perhaps we should be. After all, if Jesus is waiting on-down-the-road in Galilee, you can bet he has plans for us. No doubt he will ask things of us, the same way he challenged the disciples -- thoroughly mucking up their lives. Uh oh. Perhaps this is the morning God will grab us by the scruff of our souls to propel us into some wild scheme. Maybe this Jesus is like those people you encounter on sidewalks with clipboards and petitions to sign.

You there, yes you, I’ve got your name on my list – now march out into the world and make some kind of holy difference. Maybe that’s what scares us.

Yes, we have faith; we go to church. We are here at church today. Yet do we really want God to mess with us, to cost us anything? Leave us politely alone – hands off our career plans and our politics – oh, and keep your nose out of our approach to doing business and our way of conducting relationships. Perhaps we would rather have Jesus stay where he belongs – a meek and mild figure who presides over the sweet dreams of children; we don’t want him wandering around tapping his foot – impatiently waiting for us to show up.

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!" No wonder that Mark tells us the women "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them!" One writer puts it this way regarding the terror of the women fleeing the tomb:

"...it is terror at the 'real' circumstance that the promise and challenge of Jesus' ministry and message has gone forth from the jaws of death into the world, beckoning disciples once again to follow. For these who came early on the first day of the week to make peace with Jesus' death, closure on this 'reality' must have been sought with an underlying eagerness. For no matter how inspiring the vision had been, its costly character had been apparent at least since the midpoint of Jesus' ministry. They had approached the tomb with a reverent grief, masking a deep relief that they were no longer burdened with the challenge of a costly discipleship. They had begun to see the gain in the loss, only to be upended by the announcement: "He is not here...he is going ahead of you to Galilee."

Most scholars think that this hasty departure from the tomb is the original conclusion of Mark's gospel. It seems a funny way to end it, doesn't it? Is that any way to finish "the greatest story ever told" with people running away in amazement and fear? These same scholars believe that someone other than Mark added the final eleven verses of the gospel at a later date – someone who felt the story needed a postscript. If that's true than maybe we should read on. Maybe the postscript can answer some questions for us. Listen to how it sounds when Jesus appears to the disciples:

“and Jesus said to them, ‘go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation....and these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; they will pick up snakes in their hands; and if they drink any deadly thing, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

Well, so much for answers. The end of Mark gives us more questions. These final verses take us to an alien place. After the resurrection, it is a crazy-sounding Jesus who catches up with the disciples. After berating them for their lack of faith, he predicts the sort of things that they will do in his name. They will cast out demons; speak in tongues; hold venomous snakes in their hands. They will drink poison. And here’s the kicker – they will not be harmed by any of these deadly things. They are strange verses indeed. It is enough to make a person want to slap a disclaimer on the cover of the Bible, “Kids, the practices you hear about in here, do not try them at home.”

What kind of loopy way to finish out a gospel is this? Snakes and poison? I mean, really? Any sane person ought to be afraid of such deadly things. But maybe that’s the point. New testament scholar David Bartlett says that Mark’s resurrection story is a story of courage. I think he’s right, although there is a fine line between foolish daring and holy courage. What is it that we see in this text? If it is courage, it is courage in the face of deadly stuff... snakes and poison and things that we know can harm us. It’s crazy talk. It’s also Easter talk.

It is the way that the resurrected one talks directly to the monster of death. “Hey you, yeah you, the toothy beast with a bottomless appetite. I have been watching you. You sit back and declare that in the end everything belongs to you. You make your smug pronouncements and wait for us to crumble. You wait for the snakes and poisons, for the chemotherapies and the wars, and all the many hard things of life to wear us down. You wait for us to be left with nothing but fear. But, hear this – today we laugh at you. On this day, we stare at your destructive powers and laugh, not because we expect to be spared in this life, but because we have hope... a trust that in the end the snakes and the poison don’t win. Fear doesn’t win; even you, death, do not finally win.

Easter starts with fear. It ends with courage – a hope filled courage. And God knows we need hope – courageous hope. Powerful men, leaders of powerful nations, threaten to push buttons unleashing nuclear weapons; mass murderers and serial killers are daily news; millions upon millions of people are displaced by war and conflict, oppressed by greed and prejudice. Many more are hungry, thirsty, starving often because of unjust political and economic systems; climate change is destroying our planet; self-serving ideologies and theologies promote divisions between people, establishing strict boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ – and ‘them’ are those not to be trusted; those that must be kept at bay; perhaps even sent away or put away. Closer to home many of us or our loved ones struggle with troubles, illness, aging, dying.

The hope we have as Christians is that there is something outside of us, which is something that reaches toward us and includes us. We are not alone having to rely on just our own strength; our own wisdom; our own resources. The church declares that this something beyond us that reaches out to us and includes us exists – the name we use is God – and has acted in a remarkable, amazing one-time event some 2,000 years ago. The first disciples of Jesus never expected this; never saw it coming. The last thing they expected that morning when they went to the tomb was a young man, in a white robe, sitting there. And the last thing they expected him to say was, “Don’t be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus...who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” They weren’t expecting *that!*

But that’s what happened. And the church has been telling this outlandish story ever since – a story about something we never expected to happen in a million years. I know some of you, many of you perhaps, have a hard time believing this story. There was time in my life when I only half believed it. Oh, if I’m honest about it - there have been times when I didn’t believe it hardly at all. But I do believe it now. I believe it as much as I believe I’m standing here this very moment.

I can’t explain the mystery of it, but I know resurrection and its power to give courage and hope is real. I’ve seen too many people go to their deaths absolutely at peace because of this story not to believe it. I’ve seen too many people, when the world has taken away everything dear to them, live with a defiant joy because of this story. I’ve seen people holding onto sobriety by their fingernails realizing that if God can raise Jesus from the dead, God might be able to raise drunks when they fall. I’ve seen people

cope with and get beyond desperate situations because this story shows that God has a pretty good track record for handling desperate situations. Easter makes all the difference for mourners walking away from a grave. Don't tell me it doesn't. I've seen it too many times in my ministry. Easter gives people eaten up with the need for revenge the strength to forgive – not because they have the strength but because the risen Christ lives within them. I've seen too many people whose lives have changed for the better because of the Easter story for me *not* to believe it.

I do believe that God did something amazing back there in that cemetery a long, long time ago. I don't know how it happened or what it looked like when it happened. Even the four gospel writers can't agree on the details of what happened. Writer Sam Gould puts it this way:

“It was the strongly felt presence of Christ's spirit on the road to Damascus or to Emmaus, or where several gathered in his name that his advocates became convinced that God vindicated the message of Jesus by resurrecting him from the dead. Death was not the final blow. Jesus lived on. In the gospel of John, Jesus says to a Samaritan woman, “God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.”

Likewise, we must experience Jesus living in spirit and in truth. Whether one believes the resurrection was physical, spiritual, or metaphorical we know the living spirit of Jesus was and has been a powerful force that has led men and women to endure ridicule, physical torture, and even death to give expression to his teachings...” So call me naive, old-fashioned, gullible, but I'll keep telling the story.

Because “Jesus is alive again” makes all the difference in how we live our lives, overcome our fears, handle the past, and face the future. Easter makes all the difference in the world. Easter gives us hope that the way things have always been will not always be. Easter is about more than a fortunate Jewish rabbi being raised from the dead. It’s about the whole world being raised from the dead when he was raised. So, let death thunder and clang and rage away. We are Easter people, by golly. We are called to handle deadly things with courage. We are people of hope. We know of God’s victory of joy over sorrow; love over hate; good over evil; life over death; God’s victory – all for us.

We are called to peer into the tomb, and laughing, run as fast as we can to Galilee or wherever it is that Jesus waits for us. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Thanks and praise to God. Amen.

*Major Sources:*

“Deadly Things” by The Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston in [Day1.org](http://day1.org)  
[http://day1.org/1241-deadly\\_things](http://day1.org/1241-deadly_things) April 12, 2009.

“Well, what can you expect?” by Ronald G. Luckey in [Faith and Leadership](https://www.faithandleadership.com/ronald-g-luckey-well-what-can-you-expect)  
<https://www.faithandleadership.com/ronald-g-luckey-well-what-can-you-expect>  
April 23, 2012

“Relating the Text” by William H. Willimon in [Pulpit Resource](#), Vol. 245 No. 1, p.54.  
Editor: William H. Willimon. Wood Lake Books, Winfield, BC. January-March, 1997.

“Pastoral Perspective” by D. Cameron Murchison in [Feasting on the Word](#), p.354.  
Editors: David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor. Westminster John Knox Press.  
Louisville, Kentucky. 2008.

“From Criminal to Christ” in [Being Christian in the Twenty-First Century](#), by Sam Gould, p. 33.  
Wipf and Stock Publishers. Eugene, Oregon. 2017.