

Easter Homily

Bill Chadwick, Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
April 21, 2019 Mark 16:1-8

Friends, as you listen to Mark's account of the resurrection, I invite you to try to listen as if you have never heard this story before, as if you didn't know the accounts from the three other gospels. Try to listen as if for the first time, as we come to the close of Mark's gospel.

Mark 16 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ But he said to them, "Do not be afraid; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, there is the place they laid him. ⁷ 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." ⁸ 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.

"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." And that, my friends, is the actual end of Mark's gospel. That ending was so uncomfortable for listeners to the gospel that not one, but *two* alternative endings were soon added, which included comforting appearances by the Risen Christ.

It is so jarring for Mark's account to end this way. "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."

Afraid? Why weren't they just overjoyed? What were they afraid of?

Reminds me of a story. When I was the interim pastor in the little congregation in Le Sueur thirty-some years ago I was asked to officiate at the marriage of a young couple. The bride had recently escaped from a long-standing abusive relationship with a drug-using and violent boyfriend. But her luck had turned and she was now going to marry a sweet young man from the Le Sueur congregation.

Shortly thereafter, I was called to be the pastor of a congregation in Bayport, Minnesota. Some months after that I got a phone call from the husband of that young couple back in Le

Sueur. With his first words I sensed despair and desolation. He reported that his wife had gone back to her old boyfriend. With tears in his voice, he begged me to go and talk to her, to try to convince her to return to her husband and child.

Hoo boy.

I so wanted to say, “No thanks, none of my business,” but I felt some responsibility, having officiated at their marriage and having baptized the baby, so I said, “Okay, I’ll give it a try.”

This was before cell phones and there was no landline. So the plan was that I would drive to the old boyfriend’s house, in hopes that I would find the young woman there and try to talk to her. The boyfriend lived in a mobile home out in the country outside of Cambridge, Minnesota. The husband gave me the address.

I was more than a little nervous about encountering this boyfriend. So, I dug my clergy shirt out of the back of my closet, located my clerical collar, put my biggest cross necklace around my neck and headed toward Cambridge, driving more slowly than usual and praying all the way. In no time, it seemed, I was pulling onto the gravel road and a few miles later, having seen no other cars or human life at all along that road, the trailer came into view. It had once been white, but much of the paint had peeled off. A couple of junked cars in the driveway, a washing machine on its side next to the house, only a few wisps of grass for a lawn. All the shades were drawn, several of them hanging listlessly off-kilter.

I left my engine running and waited in my car a few moments, expecting a snarling pack of Rottweilers to appear in the front yard, or maybe a shotgun barrel to poke out a bedroom window. I did a 360-degree scan. Not another house in sight. No farmers on tractors.

Since neither dogs nor shotgun appeared, I slowly opened my car door, feeling very alone and exposed. With a deep breath and a final prayer, I slowly walked toward the front door, every sense on high alert. The small window in the front door was covered over with newspaper from the inside. The doorbell didn’t work—of course—so I knocked lightly on the door, expecting a ferociously barking dog to charge out from a back room and throw itself against the door. No dog. No human footsteps were heard, either, though I thought maybe that was because I wouldn’t be able to hear them over the sound of my heart hammering as if it wanted to leave without waiting for the rest of me. I tried to wet my lips, but my tongue was just as dry. I knocked a little louder. No answer. I knocked louder still. No response.

I calmly turned and race-walked my way back to my car and then, spewing gravel, fishtailed out of there. Whew! Dodged a bullet there, maybe literally.

That task was over. I had done my duty. I was done.

And I was so relieved.

Back to our women at the tomb. It had been a day and a half since Jesus was crucified. Maybe the women were starting to get used to the idea that he had died. Maybe they were also getting used to the idea that his dream had died with him; yes, a beautiful dream of a kin-dom of love and justice, but a very costly and obviously dangerous dream, had died with him. Jesus had talked of the necessity of loving enemies, of taking up crosses, of losing one's life... in order to find it. Like me as I sped away from that mobile home, maybe there was some *relief* among these women, and among all the followers of Jesus, when he died.

But now, the tomb is empty, the word is he's alive, and their reaction is terror.

If Jesus is alive, so is his dream, and it's going to be up to his disciples to witness to it, and to live it out, within a cruel, Roman-ruled world. Terror seized them.

The dream is still alive, almost 2000 years later. And as the Apostle Paul put it, you and I are the body of Christ in the world today. So, we are called to get on board with what the Spirit is doing. But we do it, of course, not on our own power, but within and with the Spirit's power, Resurrection Power.

Easter is a day for poetry, because the reality of resurrection is greater than the power of prose to describe.

Wendell Berry, a Kentucky farmer, has written many wonderful and powerful poems. Listen to portions of his "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front," written in 1973.

"...friends, every day do something

That won't compute. Love the Lord.

Love the world. Work for nothing.

Take all that you have and be poor.

Love someone who does not deserve it...

Ask the questions that have no answers.

...Plant sequoias...

Put your faith in the two inches of humus

that will build under the trees every thousand years...

...Laugh.

*Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
 though you have considered all the facts.
 So long as women do not go cheap
 for power, please women more than men....
 Go with your love to the fields.
 Lie down in the shade. Rest your head
 in her lap...
 As soon as the generals and the politicians
 can predict the motions of your mind,
 lose it. Leave it as a sign
 to mark the false trail, the way
 you didn't go.
 Be like the fox
 who makes more tracks than necessary,
 some in the wrong direction.
 Practice resurrection.*

(from *The Country of Marriage*, © 1973 by Wendell Berry,
 Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.)

Another famous poet, Robert Frost, famously penned the phrase, "Something there is that
 doesn't love a wall." (*Mending Wall*)

And friends, that something is God, who rolls away stones
 and breaks down walls
 and builds bridges of welcome, of forgiveness
 and of love and understanding.

Folks, we live in an alien culture, a culture of greed and selfishness, of walls and weapons, of consumerism and racism and nationalism.

But we follow one who declared: “In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, for I have overcome the world. (John 16:33)

Because of Jesus I believe that the old saying is true, “Everything will be okay in the end. If everything isn’t okay, it isn’t the end.” (Often attributed to John Lennon, but probably from Paul Coehlo.)

That is the message of Easter, of resurrection.

Two Easter stories. The Reverend Cindy Ray a few weeks ago spoke to us about ministering to people with dementia. She told about the funeral of her mother-in-law Cathy, who died a few years ago after a long siege of Alzheimer’s Disease. In her last months Cathy didn’t recognize even her family members. Some of you know that heartbreak. The Catholic priest doing the funeral, who had never met Cindy’s mother-in-law, assured the grieving family, “As of five days ago, Cathy remembers your name.”

I believe that.

Our final story comes from pastor Tom Are, who talks about his brother, Gene. (Shared by Gwin Pratt)

Gene was born with a generous heart...

...but a limited mind.

He will never read a book....

...but never forgets my birthday.

Gene’s big goal in life is...one day.....

.....to drive a car.

“I say, ‘Gene, where are you going to drive to?’

‘I’m gonna come see you, give a kiss to my niece and nephew..

...with a big hug.’

‘That’s great, Gene. What are you going to do then?’

‘I’ll take you, and we’ll go see Daddy. Don’t tell him I’m coming!’

‘Oh, I promise, Gene, your secret is good with me.’

*That's what he wants.....just to drive a car.
 We were eating in Shoney's Big Boy....
 ...because Gene thinks that's fine dining.
 We both had ordered the "cholesterol plate."*

We were talking about the trips he would take.

*And then, in a momentthat was so unlike him,
 ...so real..... that it seemed unreal, he said,
 'Brother....do you think I'll ever drive that car?'*

'Gene.....yes, I do.'

*How can I say such a thing?
 ...He'll never drive a car.*

*But, it's not about driving...
 ..even for him...
 ...I don't think.*

It's not about driving.

*It is about all that has gone wrong in this world.....
being made right.*

*I said "yes".....because.....
 ...I believe that the love of God....
 ...is the ultimate power of this world....
 ...a love that will redeem
 ...everything that has gone wrong.'"*

Let us live into this dream.

Friends, let us each day be Easter people,

choosing the way of justice and peace and love.

For in the end...

Love wins.

Amen?