

Resting in the Resurrection
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
Easter/Resurrection of the Lord
April 16, 2006
Text: Mark 16:1-8

I think we're ready.

Easter lilies and spring blooms? Check.

The Hallelujah Chorus? Check.

Colorful flags flying along the walks outside? Check.

Trumpets and timpani? Check.

Sermon with joyful proclamation of new life? Check.

Yes, I think we're ready for what is without a doubt the Church's best day. Even non-singers join in belting out "Jesus Christ is risen today," and are enveloped in triumphant joy. And that's entirely appropriate, because on Easter we celebrate the foundational tenet of Christian faith: Jesus' resurrection from the dead.

But it's that last word that sticks in my throat. Dead. Did you notice the humorous irony in the calendar this year, with Easter and Tax Day side by side? Death and taxes—life's only inevitabilities. I heard about the Sunday School teacher quizzing her fourth-grade students about heaven. "If I sold my house and my car, and gave all the money to the church, would I get into heaven?" "NO!" responded all the children. "If I fed the hungry and prayed for peace and obeyed the Golden Rule, would I get into heaven?" Again the answer was a resounding, "NO!" "Well then how *can* I get to heaven?" the teacher asked. A boy in the back of the classroom shouted, "You gotta be dead!"

And that's the word that I think must be our first word on this day of days. Easter celebrates new life, but the music, the heavenly fragrance, the hopeful message, can't quite drown out the intrusion of death in its many disguises. Among us gathered here today are some who have come only too recently from the gravesides of beloved family members and friends. Others' smiles mask hidden hurts, grief and worry and sadness and regret. We have all lived through the death of particular dreams: hopes for a certain job, a certain recognition, a certain magic, a certain security. Our busy days quickly become years and suddenly we're stunned by the contrast between the future we'd planned and the present we're living. Every single one of us has tasted death, and its bitterness remains. We cannot ignore death on a larger scale either, if today is to have any significance beyond a good show.

I've made it a point to read the daily newspaper listing of American casualties in Iraq, holding the name of each soldier in prayer as I imagine the family and friends and community connections, all changed forever. The monstrous violence in Sudan is approaching genocidal proportion—half a million dead, 2 million forced from their homes, with no end in sight. Talk of nuclear threat and nuclear weapon use has ratcheted up anxiety in the Middle East and obscured the fragile road map to peace. An annual rite of spring has little power to counter the terror, sickness, and anxiety of the world we share with six billion.

My friends, the good news of Easter will not be discovered by denying reality. We do not have to silence our questions and our deep yearning for the sake of cheerfulness and faith. Easter begins at a tomb. Let us go there, like Mary Magdalene and the other women did, with our fears and heartaches. Listen for God's good news to you and to the world in the reading of the Easter gospel according to Mark, chapter 16, at the first verse. [MARK 16:1-8]

The Garden Tomb, just outside the old city of Jerusalem, lies on a tree-covered hillside. When our group was there in February, the paths were lined with flowers, creating a lovely scene. No one purports that it is the actual tomb where the body of Jesus was laid, but it is a typical, first-century example of one. As you might imagine, it is a most popular site for Christian pilgrims, so the place is teeming with individuals and tour groups milling about, praying and worshipping and waiting in line to stoop down and step into the grave interior. To keep some semblance of order, the British site caretakers assign a tour guide to each group, who gives a little talk about the Garden Tomb before turning you loose to explore. We introduced ourselves as an interfaith group of Jewish rabbis and Protestant ministers, and perhaps this unsettled our guide, a smiling man named Reginald. He took a deep breath and rattled off the memorized script: *Jesus was betrayed by Judas, arrested, and tried before religious and political leaders. He was convicted and sentenced to die. He was beaten and forced to carry his cross to Golgotha, the place of the Skull, where he was crucified between two criminals. He suffered horribly for the sins of the world, and died. Then he was placed in an unused tomb of Joseph from Arimathea, and on the third day, God raised him from the dead. He's alive! He's alive today! I serve a risen Savior. Any questions?*

Well, yes, I have a few questions. And I'll bet you do too. For starters, where is the good news in this text? The women come to perform the age-old ritual of anointing the dead. They wonder about how they will get inside the tomb, given the large stone sealing its entrance.

But when they arrive, they discover the stone rolled back and the tomb empty except for a young man identified by his white robe as a heavenly messenger, who announces that Jesus has been raised. Amazed and filled with trembling astonishment the women run away. The story and the entire gospel of Mark end abruptly—there are no resurrection appearances, no declarations of faith, nothing to confirm that Jesus is alive. The women say nothing to anyone, *for they were afraid*. Though the translations smooth out the roughness of the grammar, the Greek manuscript ends mid-sentence with a conjunction that doesn't join the sentence to anything else. *And going out they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, because.....*

Biblical scholars strive to give reasonable explanation for this unsatisfying conclusion. If you were reading along in the pew Bibles, you noticed that later editors added text, neatly tying up the loose ends. Others have suggested that the gospel writer intentionally left it unfinished because those who hear or read it are supposed to complete it with their lives and witness. The proclamation of the risen Lord is the task of the Church in every age. In the gospel's opening verses, the writer declares this to be the "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." It's up to the Church to figure out how it should continue, and for God to bring it finally to glorious completion. [David Bartlett, *The Easter Texts: Hope, Comfort, Courage. Journal for Preachers, Volume XXIV, Number 3, Easter 2006*]

But in the meantime, I think this text just as it stands offers us good news, and the frightened women can show us how to find it. The women in Mark never see, talk with or touch the risen Jesus as Mary does in John's later and more popular version of the story. Which, when you think about it, puts them on a par with you and me, who also have not had the experience of a resurrection appearance. Despite their initial silence, the women eventually did share what they saw and heard, or else we wouldn't be where we are today. Somehow they found their voices and spoke up to Peter and the other disciples. Thank God Jesus doesn't wait to make himself known in times of victory when faith is a certainty, but in the dead ends, when fear threatens to overwhelm us, when we want to run away.

In those times remember the words of the messenger at the empty tomb, "He is going ahead of you." The resurrection is not so much an event to memorialize, but a reality to inspire hope within us. No matter where we walk, Christ has gone this way before. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, we need not fear evil, because the risen Christ has been here ahead of us, and will bring us safely through.

The very gates of hell have been breached by the One who came with peace in his heart, met a violent death, and lives again. There is no earthly or spiritual power that can ultimately prevail against God whose peace is established not through conquest but through reconciling heaven and earth. Do not be afraid: in life, in death, Christ goes before us all the way.

Perhaps the gradual dawning of this powerful truth is what finally helped the women speak. It holds the key to unlock the tombs of our own lives so that we too may know a risen Lord. Last week the Christian community lost one of its giants in the death of the Rev. William Sloan Coffin. His preaching and prophetic social witness proclaimed the gospel from chaplaincy at Yale to the pulpit of Riverside Church, from streets of protest and jail to the halls of congress. He observed about hope that it is the thing that helps us keep the faith, despite the evidence, knowing that only in so doing has the evidence any chance of changing. Hope—not self-generated, but drawn from the One who is ahead of us already—is what makes the difference. I've heard you tell about meeting Christ in the dark night of the soul. I've seen your amazement for the gift of grace that immersed you while dealing with a persistent problem, a chronic condition, a hurt that never quite mended. You witness to the reality of resurrection when you engage in impossible mission on behalf of the world's suffering, impoverished, and broken. Christ is risen! Despite our fears, alongside our questions, in the face of huge obstacles, we can go and tell the good news. Love is stronger than death. God is making all things new. Don't hesitate because you don't know all the answers or because you are afraid at times. As St. Francis of Assisi put it, "Preach the gospel at all times. When necessary, use words."

I didn't really expect to witness resurrection in Israel/Palestine. The wall or security fence is almost completed, a monument to fear and terror on both sides. Not unlike the stone covering the tomb, it looms large as a barrier between life and death. But I saw evidence of God's saving hand at work, where Jews, Christians, and Muslims –the primary interfaith community- acted on the mandates of their respective faiths to love the enemy, care for the vulnerable, and establish justice. Often that simply means coming together and listening to each other's story. Learning that there is far more that unites us than separates us. My fears about the Middle East and prospects for peace are not allayed of course. But neither do they have the final say.

Easter begins at a tomb—or even earlier, in the anguished cries of abandonment from Jesus dying on a cross. God is in the dying, God is crucified, God is in the grave, God is there when our hearts are breaking, when God's heart is breaking.... But sisters and brothers, God is there also to roll back the stone, to raise the dead, to transform sorrow into unquenchable joy, to cast out fear with unconquerable love. My use of the present tense is deliberate. Resurrection is not just a remembrance of that reality-shattering event two millennia ago, but an affirmation of its present power for you and me, and for the world God so loved. Christ is risen! Christ IS risen. Are we ready? Alleluia! Amen.

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