

## **Morning Has Broken the Silence**

A Sermon by Louise Westfall  
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Cleveland Heights, Ohio  
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**Text: Mark 16:1-8**

*For now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come, and the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.*

The glory of tradition and joy of new beginnings. A day like no other. Easter brings to mind thoughts of . . . baseball. No, not just because the Indians' home opener happened to coincide with Holy Week this year. But there are parallels between the two: both are celebrations of the new, and are surrounded with rituals and mystery and a spirit that pack the park and sanctuary beyond the faithful fans and true believers. Even the rain can't dampen the exuberance (well, not much!). Whether the Star Spangled Banner or Jesus Christ Is Risen Today, the crowd sings heartily, as if they mean it. Strangers smile warmly to each other, connected by this shared experience. Feelings run high and hope abounds. Joe DiMaggio said you look forward to Opening Day like a birthday party when you're a kid: you just know something wonderful is going to happen. On Easter the Church proclaims it: the most wonderful something *has* happened. Christ is risen! *Christ is risen indeed!*

On Opening Day anything is possible. All bets are off. . . until the first pitch comes flying across the plate, and another and another. But then reality sets in. The glitter and sheen of a new season give way to the truth of a long season with loss as well as victory (surely there will be one soon!), injuries and disappointments as well as homeruns and fireworks. The Church rejoices today that Christ is risen, but all too quickly that good news gets swallowed up by the daily dose of trouble and heartache and death, and the fact that we are mainly too busy to notice. Reality tempers our joy and cuts down our

hopes to a more reasonable size. One writer described this process of diminishment with an evocative metaphor: “The whole reason little boys always bring their gloves to baseball games and old boys never do; they have learned what they can reasonably expect from life.” [*Newsday* journalist David Hinckley]

In the early morning light of that new day so long ago, some women came to the grave of their teacher with all they could reasonably expect from life. Which is to say, they left their gloves at home, and brought only their tears and spices to anoint the dead. Listen for God’s Word that shatters all reasonable expectation in the reading of the Easter gospel according to Mark, chapter 16, at the first verse.

[MARK 16:1-8]

Silence is the first response to Christ’s resurrection. Mark’s gospel has no satisfying conclusion, no hallelujah chorus, no fall-on-your-knees, awe-stricken praise. The text that begins with a marvelous pun “When the ‘sun’ had risen...” ends abruptly “....and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” If you were reading along in the pew Bibles, you can see that later writers tried to give it a stronger, more successful ending by adding accounts of the risen Jesus’ appearances to others, but those texts are not part of the original narrative. The earliest account is captured by a scene in which fear dominates. The women come to the tomb already anxious about the practical matter of how they will roll back the heavy stone covering the grave’s entrance so they can get inside. When they arrive and find it open, they are alarmed by both the absence of Jesus’ body, and the presence of a white-robed messenger who tells them that their crucified Teacher has been raised. “Go and tell the others,” he directs them, “He will meet you in Galilee, just as he promised.” But they do not; they cannot. It’s as if fear had clutched them by the throat, constricting and constraining them into silence. It appears at first that nothing has changed. The dead are dead. What else could you reasonably expect?

I read this Easter text the first time two weeks ago, sitting in the reception area of the Women's Health Center at University Hospital prior to a doctor's appointment. I knew there would be a wait and I thought I could maximize the time by thinking about this sermon, rather than flipping through outdated copies of *Prevention* magazine. I guess I haven't ever actually read the Bible in such a public place, and I have to tell you it's an interesting experience. The television set mounted overhead was blaring with a soap opera entitled, ironically, "Guiding Light." No one appeared to be watching. There were several obviously pregnant women, and one had other children in tow. There were elderly women and women in business suits who kept looking at our watches. A few men were waiting there too, occasionally touching their wives or girlfriends in a somewhat awkward gesture of support, not quite sure what to do or how to act. There we sat, strangers, but connected by proximity and a shared experience of restless waiting. All of us waiting, waiting for different things: waiting for the baby to come, waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting for good news, waiting for a doctor's word about the next treatment or test. I read about the resurrection while waiting to see the oncologist with whom I've become personally acquainted, and that made the familiar words sound different. In that human space where vulnerability, hope, and fears collide the end of death is announced. And suddenly I could see clearly how the waiting women at Jesus' tomb might have been speechless in the face of something so unexpected, for which there was scant evidence of its truth.

Because even as we sit here inspired by the splendor of holy music and sacred story, we cannot quite set aside the events of our own lives: grief over the deaths we have known, of loved ones memorialized in these flowers; the sadness we feel in endings of all kinds, the little deaths we experience with the passage of time and the changes life inevitably brings; the raw fear we have tasted from sudden bad news, an uncertain diagnosis, a door being slammed in our face; anxiety over our children or parents or the state of the economy; concern about the state of the world with its consuming hunger and endless

wars. Like the women running from Jesus' empty tomb, we can't quite square the good news of resurrection with the realities right before our eyes.

For a long time, there has been a theory about the resurrection set forth by some biblical scholars. It's received some fresh attention lately by those who focus on the historical Jesus, and who draw great distinction between his pre-Easter and post-Easter being. The theory posits that Jesus' followers were so convinced of his divine mission, so animated by his compassionate and powerful Spirit, that after his death they continued to have a strong sense of his presence and a sense that his Kingdom was very near. That's not unreasonable I guess, but it doesn't reflect this text at all. If anyone were a candidate for the kind of follower described in this theory, it would be these women. They had traveled with Jesus, had seen him heal the sick, had heard him teach, had listened as he declared that the Kingdom of God was drawing close. These women believed in him; they loved and supported him; the gospel reports that some had even provided financially for him. They kept vigil at his cross when he was abandoned by others. And yet, they had no expectation of anything more than saying their farewells to his beloved dead body as they approached the tomb. You could hardly call their reaction one of faith in Jesus' own promises about dying and raising. It was not their faith, not their devotion, not anything about them at all that produced Easter. Completely apart from human effort or invention or hope, Jesus was raised to life by the invincible power of God.

Friends, what makes these frightened, fleeing women such compelling witnesses to the resurrection is their implicit testimony to God's victory over everything that attempts to defeat and destroy life. No evil power---but also no human fear or disbelief can overcome God's persistent, life-giving love. The women came to understand *this* reality as more "real" than anything else, even death. They went and told what they had come to know - or else we wouldn't be here celebrating it 2000 years later. Liberated from their fears, they experienced

the new life of their risen Lord. They told the disciples and Peter, who in turn shared the good news, and so on, right down through the generations until someone (or many someones) shared it with you and me. Thank God Jesus doesn't wait to make himself known only on Easter Sunday in church—but is there just as surely in the middle of a losing season, in waiting rooms, in those times when we are undone and don't have any words or explanations and when escape seems like the best or only option.

When my own time in the waiting room was over, I got the word from my doctor that I am "cured." The cancer is gone, and statistically there is only a miniscule chance of recurrence. A friend in another city rejoiced with me in this good news and said, "Boy, I'll bet your Easter sermon will be dynamite this year!" I know what he meant, but we have both wept at the graves of too many beloved ones to find God's illimitable grace only in happy endings or success stories. There is a deeper, truer reality afoot in this world: the living Spirit of Jesus Christ, God-with-us in every circumstance, working to make all things new.

How do we know that? Remember the words of the messenger at the empty tomb, "He is going ahead of you; he will meet you there." Resurrection is not so much a hallowed tradition to celebrate once a year, but a reality to inspire hope within us every day. No matter where we walk, Christ has gone this way before. Even in the valley of the shadow of death—be it the death-dealing ways of the world or the death of loved ones or our own mortality, we need not fear evil, because the risen Christ has been here ahead of us, and will be with us all the way through. Easter—like the opening day of baseball season—is just the beginning. What really matters is what happens now. Death has been swallowed up in victory, wrote the apostle Paul, continuing: Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Can we believe it? Can we rely on the truth that Jesus Christ is risen today? Can we reevaluate our expectations of reality by the light pouring forth from that empty grave? Well, it's hard. Death does not accept defeat easily. The daily headlines sound like the same old, same old. *Reasonable* expectations seem prudent because if you keep them low you won't ever be disappointed. Questions and doubts remain. The pitching needs work. Someone has noted how church is like baseball: many attend, few understand. And that includes this pastor. But the resurrection shouts into the silence of our fearful hearts: *Christ is alive! Love has the last word!* ... so don't forget to bring your glove to every game.

Easter is the Church's Opening Day. The grave is open. The future is open. God has rolled back reality and rendered death null and void. God has taken the worst thing and changed it into a new thing. God has heard the silence born of our fear and spoken a Word of life, here and now and forever. So let us say it, shout it, share it, live it: CHRIST IS RISEN! CHRIST IS RISEN INDEED! Thanks be to God!