

Isaiah 65:17-25
Mark 16:1-8

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Easter Day
April 8, 2007

FINISHING THE EASTER STORY

"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.
So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them." *Mark 16:7-8a*

About the time we were getting ready to leave to come here this morning, two time zones to the west an Easter sunrise service began on the rim of the Grand Canyon. Each year as the Scripture is read, "And an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and rolled back the stone" (Matt. 28:2), a giant boulder is heaved over the rim. As it goes hurtling and crashing down the side of that immense canyon into the Colorado River far below, a 2,000 voice choir erupts into the Hallelujah chorus. What a way to make an Easter statement.

Resurrection! On this day we come back to the same story every year because we need to; to remember who we are, and whose we are, and how much we are loved. We come back because we need hope. We also need to be crowd-barred from all the little normalcies, doubts, fears and retreats within ourselves that disable us from being a resurrection people. Easter does not demand that we do large and dramatic things, but that we do the small things with a largeness of heart, a heart that trusts in the real and present resurrection companionship of our Lord.

Nothing quite empties resurrection of its power like trying to explain it. As Ella Pearson Mitchell puts it, resurrection is like a fifth dimension, like removing a yolk from its egg—without breaking the shell! Paul has the good sense not to try to explain resurrection. Just the opposite, he says it's about trusting, about faith, which ceases to be faith when it can be explained. Easter, by its stiff-arming death aside, summons us not to an armchair faith, but a journey faith, the sort that is willing to take a chance to stay in a relationship with God-in-Christ—not for the church's sake, as though it were a marketing strategy to keep you coming back, but for our own sake, and for the sake of those who rely on us. Mark understands that we need to take this chance on God in Christ for the long haul, and he underscores this in the way he ends his gospel story—or, the way he *doesn't* end it!

Mark's Gospel seems to beg for an ending. Scholars are virtually unanimous that verse 8 is where the evangelist intentionally ended his gospel, and that the following verses were added later by others who were dissatisfied with the absence of 'Jesus sightings' after the resurrection. In Mark's version, no one actually *sees*

the resurrected Jesus. (Keep that word in mind for later.) For we who prefer neatly resolved Hollywood endings, Mark's ending is—well, unsatisfying. Like reading an Agatha Christie mystery you discovered in a motel drawer on holiday, only to arrive at the last page and find it missing. Remember that silly ditty we used to sing in school to the tune of “Stars and Stripes Forever”? The one that goes, “Be kind to our web footed friends, for a duck may be somebody's mother, and you may think that this is the end, well it is... !” (And that's the last solo you'll ever hear from me!)

Like it or not, the story does have an ending. But it's one that *you* have to supply. This invitation to take the initiative has been like a steady ground bass theme throughout Mark's Gospel. Mark constantly challenges us to get personal with the story, not as a passive observer watching from a tree limb as the parade goes by, but one who climbs down and stays involved to the very end.

Mark is the oldest and shortest gospel, which all three later gospels benefit from and use in different degrees. It's also my favorite gospel. There's no birth story in Mark. He begins Jesus' story at his baptism when Jesus is perhaps 30 years old. There are very few parables, beyond the cluster of parables on the seed throughout chapter 4. And there are no long teaching sections (like Matthew's sermon on the mount). but there's this—*spontaneity!* Time and again Mark says “and immediately” this or that happened, like a spotlight shattering the darkness.

Mark's gospel shows Jesus in action, with minimal comment. That's our job! In Mark's Gospel “seeing” is everything. But it's not seeing as in noticing or observing—see Bill chase Mary, see Spot run. It's the impulse, the invitation to *see* as in “Aaaahh...! *Now* I get it!” All through Mark, after a miracle Jesus says to the onlookers, “Don't tell anyone about this.” But of course they do. He doesn't want frantic reporting, like tattling theater goers after a Broadway show. He doesn't want an audience in it for entertainment or personal gain; people who go home without limping or blindness for the first time, yet who are still crippled and unseeing. Jesus lives and breathes the power of the living God. All he wants is to set God free from being cloistered within us, like a lost hiker who's traveling with a map in his rucksack, but he doesn't know it. That close! He doesn't want people to get religion. Jesus knows only too well that it's religion that got the people into such a mess in the first place. It's the same today. We all know how religion can be its own worst enemy. No, he wants us to have a resurrection experience by taking a flying leap of faith into God. Do you remember that marvelous scene in “Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade” where Harrison Ford's character is getting close to finding the holy grail, the cup Jesus used at the last supper? He's working through a devilish last journey inside a mountain, like stepping on just the right Hebrew characters to traverse a booby trapped path, when he finally comes to the last

hurdle: a seemingly unsurpassable cleft in the earth. He's stuck, and yet so close to his goal. In frustration he grabs a handful of stones and hurls them into the abyss, and there before his eyes, scudding across the void, the stones pick out a narrow glass-like path, suspended in air. It's the only way across. But he has to step on what appears to be—*nothing!* It's a pure leap of faith. Jesus knows from long experience that there are no other worthwhile options for the long haul.

Easter is about discovering for ourselves that God is alive in the living, intimate, ambiguously “familiar” present—what we think we see and know! So what does Mark do, after word of the resurrection he refuses to make Jesus into another side show, like an entertainer returning for a bow and an encore. Instead he lets a messenger (that's what “angel” means) in the tomb speak the gospel's last word to the little covey of faithful women who arrive at dawn. “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him...” That little word “see” is so powerfully ambiguous. It can mean see like, “I saw Bruce at the post office.” But in Mark seeing, when it has anything to do with Jesus or the revealing of God's kingdom, means something very different. It means getting a revelation, an “Aaaahh, I *get* it, I see...I *feel*, I *know*...!” The sort of knowing that only comes from abandonment, a full engagement, a suspension of the intellect, a staying with and trusting this great revelation, this invitation to follow after.

Then there's that other word “Galilee,” the place where Jesus and the disciples spend two thirds of Mark's Gospel. Galilee, the familiar, the commonplace, the flying shuttle on the loom of the everyday with its recognizable faces, saints and rogues, loss and heartbreak and celebrations. Galilee is our little conversation on the steps of the post office, or in the tavern. Galilee is where home is. It's “where, when you go there, they have to let you in.” Galilee is the Acme or Whole Foods, and gas station, the bleachers in Wilson Farm Park. It's St. John's, Route 30, catching up with the neighbors, the R-5, the office, the kitchen window. *There* you will find him.

Last night, on a sermon break, I went into the bedroom where Jane, packing for our China trip, was looking frantically for a small but prized emerald necklace that I had bought for her fiftieth birthday. She'd spent a frenzied half hour looking for it. I dutifully poked around in all the places she'd already poured through. I offered consolation that it would turn up. It would, I insisted softly, turn up. I believed it. And privately I prayed for its discovery. And we kept looking. But I just knew. Anyway, that aside....

I want to tell you an unexceptional little story, but in its ordinariness I hope it makes its point about resurrection power and what happens when we invite God into the commonplace. It was November 20, 1994, a cold and windy Saturday with

a malevolent prediction of winter ahead. As it was Carolyn's sixteenth birthday (and also Jane's) we wanted to do something special and out of the ordinary. So I made reservations at The Four Seasons Hotel in the city for their renowned "high tea." We set out in good time, and in fact reached downtown with a lot of time to spare, and as our reservation was not until 3.45 p.m., I decided to drive around downtown to let the girls see a little more of the city. Just past Rittenhouse Square, on Walnut, the car's engine quit and wouldn't restart. We were snarling traffic unmercifully and within a minute had six blocks of frustrated drivers sitting on their horns behind us. I managed to push the car across the traffic to mount the low sidewalk. Then I got Jane and the girls into a taxi for the Four Seasons, and told them I would get there as soon as I could. It was heartbreaking to miss Carolyn's sixteenth birthday party as a family, but *c'est la vie!*

About a block away a concierge helped me locate a towing service and he told them where I would be waiting (this was before cell phones were common). So, on the corner of Walnut and 20th Street on a bitterly cold late Saturday afternoon, I began to wait. I counted a few blessings. I could have broken down on the Schuylkill Expressway. I could have stalled in the center lane of hurtling traffic. So, looked on the bright side. Katherine and Carolyn had never ridden in a taxi before, and they were at least enjoying a very civilized afternoon English tea. Then my mind started to plow through the confusion of new plans. The nearest Buick dealership was on Broad Street near Temple. It was late Saturday, and in an open lot or on that street my car might be a mere skeleton of its former self by Monday when the dealership opened. Jane would have to get another taxi to the train station, then a train to Devon. Then, how to get home from there? Not least of the problems was that we had been invited to a dinner party that evening for Jane's and Judy Graham's birthday. And there was little I could do about any of it, except make a few phone calls to keep in touch, though of course, there wasn't a pay phone near the car.

What else could I do?

A prayer, Victor! A prayer would be in order, don't you think. So, shivering in the cold after about half an hour, I sat in the car and prayed and left the whole situation in the Lord's hands. In such moments I have a habit of turning my hands upward as a way of helping me release whatever situation needs to be let go. So. I asked God to simply take care of everything. There was nothing life threatening here, just a commonplace mix of nasty little frustrations.

An hour and twenty minutes and three phone calls later the tow truck arrived in the dark. Just as we were about to head off for Broad Street, I asked, almost on impulse, what the fee would be to be towed to our dealership in Wayne, about fifteen miles away.

“About thirty bucks extra,” he said.

I was very pleasantly surprised. Could he tow me there?

“No problem,” he said, cheerily.

The Schuylkill looked like a log jam, so we bounced and heaved like a troop carrier through a maze of back streets all the way to Wayne. On the way out there he told me he had a girl friend in Berwyn and thought he’d look her up while he was in the area. That means he has to go through Devon, I gloated. Would he mind dropping me off on the way home at the old Devon Wawa, I wondered.

“Glad to,” he said. This was getting better by the minute!

Telephoning from Devon and finding no one home yet I started to walk home, still very concerned about Jane and the girls negotiating unfamiliar territory in the cold of the city. Then as I walked under the railway bridge and passed the north ramp of the train station, I looked back to see a train pulling in at that very moment, and three very familiar silhouettes leaving the platform. I ran up the ramp, and there was Bob Miller waiting for them to give them a ride home. What an angel of mercy!

We were just seven minutes late for the dinner party, after running home to change—well within the fashionable fifteen minutes allowed. The waiters at the Four Seasons had fixed two plates of delectable high tea pastries and sandwiches. The girls got two taxi rides *and* a train ride, none of which they had ever had before. On Monday morning the insurance paid for most of the towing charge. And later that day the dealership called to say that all the repairs were covered by the warranty!

All you have to do is ask!

Oh, and by the way, last night, *immediately* (sound familiar?) as I finished a private prayer—my second for that discovery, Jane opened her clothes drawer, and there on top of her clothes was a small white box, and in it—her emerald necklace!

God in the ordinary and the extraordinary. Finding Jesus in Galilee, just as he told us.

In the winter of 1875, a German ship, the Deutschland, foundered in the mouth of London’s River Thames, and five Franciscan nuns, among others, drowned. Later, the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote an ambitious poem entitled “The Wreck of the Deutschland. One half line, so typical of Hopkins, especially stands out: “Let him easter in us.” A rare verb indeed. But how it speaks to this day, his yearning for us, and our great need.

Won’t you let him “easter” in you.

Amen.