

Easter Sunday – April 1, 2018

Mark 16:1-8; Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43

Grace to you and peace...

Cemeteries are sad places; monuments to lives now past and gone; reminders of our own inevitable deaths. Cemeteries are sad places...but they are also extraordinarily peaceful, often beautiful. Even in their evocations of what has been lost, there is a serene comfort in visiting a cemetery. Cemeteries are sad places. But they are also predictable.

The faithful women who were present as Jesus breathed his last were clear about their expectations as they made their early morning visit to the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. In their grief, even remembering the horror of his crucifixion, their intention was to anoint his body for a proper burial, according to their custom. Longing to perform one last act of tender devotion for this one they loved, their only question was who would roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb. Cemeteries are sad places. But they are predictable.

An empty tomb, on the other hand, is completely unraveling.

“When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.”

The women came to perform a ritual that would help them find, in our current vernacular, some “closure” to the tragic events that had put an end to Jesus, and to the movement of hope that his

life had inspired. They came prepared to make peace with “the way things are,” and found that nothing was as they expected.

“You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.” With a simple gesture toward the empty space where his body had been laid, this mysterious young man dressed in white announced the impossible. It is little wonder that the women “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.”

As unsettling and unsatisfying as the ending to Mark’s gospel is, it seems to me the most realistic of all the accounts of the resurrection. Stunned and fearful silence in the face of the impossible is a reasonable response.

A young clergy friend soberly gave her own witness to this truth. A couple of years ago her young and seemingly healthy husband suffered a massive and unexpected heart attack. For seven and a half minutes she experienced the reality of his death. Then he was revived. In quiet, reverent strength she said, “The joy of the resurrection doesn’t take away the experience of death and grief. To witness resurrection is not instant joy; the response is...complicated.”

As humans we learn to make peace with the expected, the predictable, however sad; but when we witness the impossible – then what?!

The faithful women of Mark’s gospel went about doing the work of the predictable, limited only by the immovable stone that held

death in its place. But God's stone-moving power revealed a life beyond predictability. And isn't that what Mark's gospel has been proclaiming all along?

From the very "beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God," Mark has portrayed Jesus setting people free from all the tombs that prevent them from experiencing the reign of God that is at hand. Casting out spirits that demonize lives, healing people from illness, cleansing lepers and restoring them to community, challenging religious authority that binds people in guilt, shame, and oppression; feeding those who are hungry, stilling storms that terrify his disciples...again and again during Jesus' lifetime God makes the impossible possible.

Liberating people for lives they never imagined possible, Jesus sows the unexpected and disrupts the predictable, wreaking havoc with the status quo that maintains the powerful in comfort. And as he goes he invites his disciples and the crowds to "take up their cross and follow," giving up their predictable life in this world for the sake of the good news of God's reign.

There are so many tombs that surround us. So much tragedy and grief and fear that threaten, that it feels easier to roll a great big stone of denial, or anger, or resentment, or hopelessness over the mouth of the tomb and resign ourselves to the predictability of what is. Cemeteries are sad places, but they are predictable.

For years we have resigned ourselves to "thoughts and prayers" as the only possible response to children being gunned down in their schools. That our only option for safety from gun violence is

to barricade ourselves in churches, in concert venues, in movie theaters – in every public and private space. There’s nothing to be done but grieve. That is, until some traumatized teens stand up from the places where their slain friends have lain, proclaiming that actually, the impossible is possible. Change can happen, and new life springs forth from the very heart of death, and grief, and trauma. As we witness their resurrection hope we too begin, at least a little, to believe that the impossible can happen.

As racist and islamaphobic sentiments and actions become more public we can no longer hide the stench behind the great stones of our denial and complicity. God’s stone-moving power has opened the breach and we have no choice but to see the death-dealing consequences of white privilege and unjust systems. As much as it unsettles the predictability of what we have come to expect, that tomb has been opened for us to imagine the possibility of new life for all who live in our country.

As we begin to recognize Jesus’ crucifixion by state-sponsored violence in the shooting of an innocent African American young man holding a cell phone, the stone of “law and order” and “not all cops” rolls away and we see the bias that we have tried so long to deny, and we experience the very pain we have wanted so much to close off.

Even when the diagnosis is poor or age takes its toll, and the predictable reality of death brings grief beyond bearing...

It is precisely HERE in the midst of all the grief and sorrow, tragedy and fear that Resurrection happens.

The empty tomb in Mark represents not the end of God's salvation story but in fact a return to "the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" – as it takes shape in our own lives of responsive discipleship. The women at the tomb are sent with a message: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that Jesus is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you."

Mark's resurrection story offers us no neat conclusion that allows us to smile with contented joy and head home to enjoy the Easter ham. Rather we receive an incomplete, promise-filled and unsettling invitation to keep following to where we will see Jesus...the one who goes ahead of us, bringing life where we expected only death.

Jesus' death is not the last word. The forces of evil have not triumphed in silencing the "One who comes in the name of the Lord." Oppression and suffering, death and denial – these tombs are opened, by the stone-moving power of God. Faith, hope, and love abide, calling us to live into them as we follow the way of Christ.

Terror and amazement – even silence, out of fear – are appropriate responses to witnessing the impossible.

At least until Faith has had a chance to take a deep breath. Until a small kernel of Hope breaks open and a tiny green sprout begins to make its way toward the light and Love propels us into the reign of God.

Early in the morning on the first day of the week, faithful women encountered the impossible and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement seized them; and they said nothing to anyone...Until they did.

Alleluia, Christ is Risen.
Christ is Risen indeed. Alleluia.

Amen.