

EASTER FEAR AND JOY

Mark 16:1-8

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There's a good chance that Mark's Gospel originally ended at verse 8 which said: "*and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.*" That means that in this Gospel, there's no great shout of victory, no grand confirming miracle. Only silence and fear. Even if we read the longer ending of Mark we have, first, Mary Magdlene telling the other disciples that Jesus had appeared to her and they did not believe her. That is followed by Jesus appearing to the two people coming in to town and they told the others and they did not believe

Matthew and Luke speak of Easter with resurrection appearances. Not Mark if we stop where many scholars said the gospel of Mark stopped.

No wonder then that interpreters, during the Second Century, added a longer, more triumphant ending to Mark's rather terse and somewhat disturbing ending.

This is not to say that Mark did not believe that Christ rose from the dead, but I think Mark was like all of us here this morning. You see, he, not his disciples, not the women who went to the tomb, not the political and religious authorities, not anyone else, believed there would be a resurrection. Once death had occurred what you had was fear and overwhelming sadness. The women went to the tomb on Easter in tears not with great joy, and they left terrified.

You see, in Mark's account, the roles of the disciples now appear to have been taken by the women who go out to the tomb in the darkness, in one last act of love and affection for Jesus, to dress the dead body of Jesus with sweet smelling spices. What the women discover is that the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty. A "*young man*" tells them that Jesus is raised and the women flee in terror, in abject fear, and in silence. There is fear because no one had heard of such a thing. They were told by the "*young man*" to go and tell the disciples and Peter that Jesus *is going ahead to Galilee as he said and will meet them there*.

But, according to Mark, what did they do? "*They said nothing to anyone*" because *they were afraid*." Now admittedly, in other gospel accounts they do tell. In fact, Matthew says, "*They went quickly and told the disciples*." Luke says, the women tell them and Peter runs to the tomb.

Mark's account, however, is not only terse, but also what one might expect in a gospel like Mark that is one long passion story. In Mark, the story of Jesus is full of rejection, pain, and failure. The disciples are promised few rewards and favors for their discipleship. They are rather promised a share in the suffering and rejection that Jesus encounters. Last Sunday we reminded you that even we are the ones, if we want to follow Jesus, who might expect a cross to be placed upon our backs.

This may be a different Easter sermon than you expected, or even hoped for, but I would like to be Mark this morning. This morning let's look first at these women who came to the tomb with their spices in their rather pitiful human attempt to put a better face upon the horrible fact of the death of Jesus. Let's take these faithful women, with their spices, as a parable of us all when it comes to our reaction to defeat and death.

Let us start at the beginning. When the Sabbath was over, sabbath was a Saturday in that case, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could go and anoint Jesus' body.

You remember it was on Good Friday that Jesus was put to death and the end came late enough in the day that no one could claim and then put the body of Jesus in a tomb with proper preparation because the Sabbath began at sundown. The Sabbath did not allow anything to be done and so it was

Sunday morning early that the ladies could go with spices to anoint the body of Jesus

Three days ago, the horrible, public spectacle took place at The Place of the Skull. Jesus, the most gentle, loving person who ever lived, was horribly, brutally tortured to death in crucifixion. Before a screaming mob surrounding him, he agonizingly breathed his last.

And somehow, knowing those horrible events, the couple of handfuls of sweet-smelling spices seem terribly inadequate, terribly futile. Still, they did what they could. And in the face of death, nearly all of our human gestures seem equally pitiful and futile, but it is best we know how.

All of us have had to face death in one way or another. And, when it is someone we deeply love it is hard to do. And let's admit it, there is fear involved. The question, "What's going to happen to me?" is a question of fear. *If they are no longer here, now what?*

Well-meaning friends try to be helpful at the time of the death of a loved one. Maybe they bring over a pie, and in my instance, people brought over entire meals, which was very much appreciated by all those in the family trying to deal with something as final as death who were not *with it* enough to cook much. But when we good people do such things we will all admit it cannot take away the fear and pain of death.

Some will say, "Well, he has gone on to a better place," but what could be a better place than here with us? Or we say, "She will live on in our memories." But living in our memories are not the same as living with us. For many people dealing with those memories is what makes the process of grief take so long. We both want to remember, and at the same time, we don't want to remember because it is painful. We can be doing pretty good with our grieving process, handling it as best we can, and then we see something or hear something that reminds us of our loved one and the pain is there again as fresh as can be.

When Marilyn and I were married we took Dr. Courtland Monroe and his wife Mary Lou up on an offer to let us use a place they had the Villages in Florida for a few days.

The place is built around the concept of a number of "Villages" with a Town Square that had various stores and a gathering place for the residents to hear music, line dance, and other such things.

Marilyn and I listened to music but were not impressed with line dancing. But one of the songs we would hear every time we were at the Square was a song by Anne Murray. "Can I have this Dance."

It became part of the closing moments of our evenings everynight of our lives when we were together. We ended our day with a responsive repetition of this song.

One: May I have this dance?

Other: For the rest of my life.

One: Because when we're together

Other: it feels so right. May I have this dance?

One: for the rest of my life.

Then we would have our evening prayers including prayers of people in our churches, family, and the events in the world. A kiss and the day was over.

So, even today, I will be listening to the radio on the oldies station and hear that song and the lovelymemorysparks a pang of grief.

When we love someone, we don't want them to leave us, to be absent from us, to go anywhere, no matter how wonderful the place they are going is supposed to be. To "live on in our memories" is hardly living with us. We have some wonderful memories, but we don't want memories. We want them, as they were when they were with us here. We don't love our memories about them; we love them. The same was true of the women who went to anoint the body of Jesus.

Once someone is taken from us by death (and that's how it feels, right? Taken from us.) we try very hard to remember everything we can about the person who has died. We may keep a few of their

belongings nearby in a concerted effort to remember them. But eventually, they become painful reminders that the person is not with us. And that's why we grieve. And our grief is not some sick, psychotic reaction to death; it is the natural, normal, loving human response to death. And yet, even our deepest, most expressive grief can't really be called an effective response to death. The grief may be natural, necessary, and expected. But grief doesn't do anything about death, the loss, the ending, the regret, the aloneness. Nothing we can do does anything about death. The women were grieving,

Again, well-meaning friends will ask, *"Is your life getting back to normal?"* Or maybe they say, *"I know this has been a painful adjustment for you, but you do seem to be getting better."* But we don't want to get back to *"normal."* It seems wrong to "adjust" to dying. But really now, what options do we have? What's to be done with death?

Deny it? *"We have only one request,"* the grieving family said to me. *"We ask that you make our dad's service a celebration of life, a time of remembrance and joy, and that nothing will be said about death."*

They were in shock, yes. Their father had come out of the surf, while they were on a family vacation, and had collapsed on the beach, struck down by a massive heart attack. As with any bereavement, there were other factors. Their father had divorced their mother some time ago in a very ugly divorce that continued to cause the family pain. There had been symptoms that the father had ignored, refusing to see a doctor, shunning all attempts to get the periodic chest pains checked out. The father's relationship with his children was far from positive since he had little contact with them in recent years. This so-called family vacation they were on was to help heal some of that.

Now he had died. His death had put an end to any hope of restoration or reconciliation. Surely his children felt anger because his death might have been avoided if their dad had not been so adamant in his scorn for doctors. Death had the final say. The door has closed. The remaining family was left holding their grief, anger, regret and all the rest. Death had conquered.

No wonder the family asked that *"nothing will be said about death."* Perhaps by putting a smile on things and refusing to even use the word, we can do something to defend ourselves against the power of death.

My friends, I doubt it.

And so, I want you to consider these women with their spices, these best friends of Jesus going out to dress the body of their friend who has now been dead for three days, take those women and this rather pitiful gesture as a symbol for all of us at the time of death. Everybody tries to deal with death by bringing a handful of sweet-smelling spices to the tomb.

Our well-meaning gestures seem so pitifully inadequate in the face of great, final death. Death has had the last word.

Or does it?

The women go out to the tomb but when they arrive at this place of death, to their amazement, they are told that the body is not here. What? In one terrible last outrage, someone has stolen the body?

But, no "He is risen!" says the young man dressed in white.

What? No one had ever been raised from the dead, bodily raised, set loose again in the world. "He is raised?"

This Easter morning hear me say to you that *"He is risen!"* means this: Christ's resurrection means that we, frail, mortal, finite human beings whose words and deeds are so inadequate in the face of death, have received a great gift, a gift we had no way to give ourselves. God—the one who creates life and gives life—is determined to be the creator and giver of life even in death.

Because Jesus is raised, we are bold to believe that we also shall be raised. The one who was cruelly, brutally killed is the one who rises, and, in love, he is determined to rise not alone. Christ brings

us along with him for the ride. He reaches into the horror of death, all the pain and the grief, and all of our rather pitiful, inadequate responses, and he makes one grand response of his own. He is raised!

This is the good news that gathers us this day. Even news for the frightened ladies in Mark's Gospel.

Here is the best good news you will ever hear: "He is risen!"

I don't know what the women did with those sweet-smelling spices. Perhaps it set them back a far sum of money to buy such spices. It was a beautiful gesture. Maybe they took them back home to use for the next bereavement that hit them. Mark doesn't say. I like to think that the women, upon hearing the announcement, simply dropped the spices and ran all the way back to Jerusalem. Mark says that they were terrified. Maybe in their fear they just dropped everything and started running.

Now one might think that the women would have felt joy at hearing the announcement of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But Mark says they were frightened. One can understand their fear in the face of death. Fear of death has got to be at the top of the list of our phobias. It is frightening to be honest about how we human beings are so very inadequate in the face of death, frightening to admit that we are—all of us and everyone we love—mortal.

But maybe Easter also carries with it its own kind of fear. The Bible says that it is a *"fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God."* And today, we and all our fears have fallen into the everlasting arms of a living God. We are not the resourceful, powerful agents we would like to be, particularly when it comes to dying. And now, in the resurrection, God does for us that which we cannot do for ourselves. God triumphs over the great *"final enemy"* of death. God does something about our mortality problem. The story that's going on between us and God doesn't end with our dying. It's not over until God says it's over.

Note that the young man in white who greets the spice-bearing women at the empty tomb doesn't just tell them that crucified Jesus has been raised from the dead, he also tells them, *"Go tell somebody. Get out of the cemetery and go back into the world to let everybody know, 'He is raised! God wins! Death is done.'"*

So, whether this announcement stirs fear, doubt, or joy in you, you can forget those innocuous stock phrases, drop the sweet-smelling but ultimately ineffective cosmetic spices, and run to tell this Easter message. *"He is risen! He is risen indeed!"*

And, when death is recent and tough to deal with, but let us proclaim the Easter message over and over again until our grief is eventually defeated by the good news of Easter. Death is not the final word!

Christ is risen, He is risen indeed!!