

Easter Sunday 2015
Sermon 4.5.15
Scripture: Mark 16:1-10

Happy Easter, everyone. Truly. First, though, I'm going to start in a dark place—not unlike those women who went to the tomb.

On the morning after the day after the verdict was announced regarding Darren Wilson's shooting of Michael Brown, we Goodmans were on our way to Thanksgiving in Washington D.C. We break up the trip with an overnight in a hotel at a halfway point, this time in Princeton, NJ. Jack and Jess were still in the room; Toby and I were at breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Over my head a television was channeling CNN. The report was covering the riots and looting in Ferguson, Missouri.

There is some debate as to how wide-ranging and enveloping those riots were. Some said the television news focused on the few isolated fires set because, let's face it, such things make for good television. Toby certainly seemed to think so. He couldn't take his eyes off it.

But it wasn't just mesmerizing; it was compelling, mystifying. "What's happening?" he wanted to know.

"That's Ferguson, a neighborhood in Ferguson." I explained that the people were angry at the verdict: the grand jury had come back with No True Bill.

Toby watched as the same troubling reel of tape was played over and over, and the closed caption scrolled across the screen—an analysis. "Why don't they just get the officer?" Obviously increasingly outraged by what was going on, he said, "Why don't they just get the officer who did it? Then this whole thing would stop. They should just get the guy who did it and everyone would calm down."

"Exactly," I said. That's exactly it. Human beings: we know everything will be alright, all better, if we just find the right guy to kill and then kill him.

A dark place: it's where that first Easter began. It's also where Mark's telling of it ends: "...for they were afraid." Actually, a closer rendition of the text is this: "To no one nothing they said, they were afraid for..." an ending with syntax only Yoda could love, and with a message that it's likely not even he could.

I mean, it's not for nothing that people have long rejected the notion that this is how the story should end. For nearly as long as Mark's gospel has been in circulation, there's been the urge to tidy things up a bit, to tie off the ending in completion, in perfection. Open your Bible and see: there

are two additional endings to this book—“The Shorter Ending of Mark” and “The Longer Ending of Mark.” Both are early, dating from not long into the time of the early church; and both attempt to infuse with good news and inspiration the otherwise ragged, cut-off ending that Mark apparently had in mind

So why not just take these as the proper ending? Why suppose that “Mark” was up to something else? Because these endings are clearly not of the same mind or hand. These endings are such dramatic departures, stylistically and theologically, from Mark’s writing and understanding. They have in use words found nowhere else in this narrative. (The shorter ending speaks of an “...imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.” Mark just didn’t write like that.) And they have in use none of the words that Mark used as habitually as valley girls say “like” (“suddenly,” “immediately”).

So, if we want to stay with the earliest version of the earliest version, we’re stuck with Mark’s ragged, cut off ending: “To no one nothing they said, they were afraid for...” “...they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

It begs the question, right? Of what were they afraid?

The most obvious answer is that they were afraid of the apparent fact that the laws of nature suddenly didn’t seem to apply. Death is a fact of life. And we know what death looks like: scary as it might be, it’s at least familiar and predictable in its general contours. We also know what death doesn’t look like: it doesn’t look like this, an empty tomb and a promise regarding the one who’s supposed to be dead, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here...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.”

I remember once when I was a kid—a thing that happened that must surely have been a dream. But I didn’t experience it like a dream, and I don’t now remember it like a dream. I experienced it as actual and remember it as actual. It was the middle of the night and I was awake in the utter darkness of my room. I decided to get up, but my bed had become something of a box. I felt with my hands these suddenly and mysteriously closed surroundings—even as I knew that my bed is not a box and my room has a door out. But at that time, during that moment, the facts as I knew them had utterly changed. It wasn’t simply that what I had expected to be the case was suddenly not the case; it’s that the facts as I knew them to be suddenly were otherwise—and I was afraid.

Mary and Mary and Salome didn't just have their expectations go unmet—grim as those expectations were. Instead, the world as they knew it was suddenly not what they knew it to be. They had seen Jesus die. They had stayed and watched; though from a distance, they had clearly seen. They had also watched as Joseph of Arimathea brought down the body and buried it in his own tomb. But then the facts as they knew them to be were utterly otherwise.

And forget that, eventually, they'd come to understand this as good news, as promising news: death is not the end; the fear of death need have no hold on us; the powers and principalities that peddle in death crumble and blow away like dust amidst the righteous and redeeming reign of God. Forget for the moment that this resurrection of one so apparently forsaken implies that what the world deems forsaken and shameful is, in God's estimation, ripe circumstance for revelation and redemption. (I read a scholar once, someone who believed in God but not in Jesus. He claimed that he had no doubt in God's power to resurrect, he just doubted he'd resurrect Jesus, of all people. I'll tell you, this is the precisely why I believe in the resurrection of Jesus—he who was homeless, powerless, childless, also anointed and crucified and resurrected one of God.) Forget everything we assert as good following this thoroughly boundary-breaking event—though all of that is true enough, and would likely dawn on these women eventually. For now, just recognize that the world was suddenly revealed as governed by rules other than those we know as established—and that's frightening even though it's also unfathomably good.

So, that's what they were afraid of. Matter settled.

But, you know, that's all dramatic irony. That reading of their fear is dramatically ironic, right? It involves “forgetting” a lot of stuff. It involves us setting aside for a moment what we know to be true. Dramatic irony: this is when the audience of a dramatic production knows what the characters in the production don't know. We as readers of the gospel know what Mary and Mary and Salome don't know, which means their fear isn't our fear, is instead our forward-leaning delight. We can look forward in joyful anticipation to when they come to know what we know—that this isn't a frightening development but an utterly inspiring and encouraging one! Just wait 'til they figure that out! Then they'll don pastel colors and hunt for Easter eggs with the rest of us!

The trouble with that reading is that I don't think Mark meant for his readers to be an audience. I think he meant for them to be as characters in this story; I think he meant for *us* to be as characters in this divine comedy that he was the first to write down—this divine comedy in which love and joy and hilarity are the final word. I think he meant for his gospel to have the sort of

immediacy that it had for him—which would fold his readers into the story, which would activate them as not mere watchers but as actors, participants.

When Mark remembers Jesus as going ahead of them to Galilee, Mark is claiming that Jesus has gone ahead of the disciples back to the place where it all began and he's implying that there Jesus will meet them so they might do it all again.

Do you remember on the 2nd Sunday of Advent, when I preached about Mark's urging those who hear his gospel to go back and try it again? It's this that had me thinking in those terms. The disciples: they'll go back to Galilee and they'll decide to follow him, they'll listen to and learn from him, they'll go out in his name to heal and to cleanse and to confront a world fallen into enemy hands and to set that enemy into retreat. They'll do it all again, and again, and again. Every time, when having come back to this ending that sets them back to the beginning; every time, when having come back to this tomb that won't hold as dead what's supposed to be dead; every time they end up back at this place: they'll be sent back to the beginning to travel the journey again. Every time *we'll* be sent back to the beginning to travel this journey again.

Because, obviously, we haven't learned the lesson. Obviously there's something of the truth that we've missed. Otherwise we wouldn't keep coming to the tomb expecting to find Jesus; otherwise we wouldn't come to a tomb at all, since tombs have no claim on God's work in the world, which Jesus so fully embodied and manifest and invited us also to do.

This going back and doing it over again: this is ours to do. In a real way, we—that is, the church—are the clearest sign of the reality of the Resurrection.

So, dramatic irony won't work for us this morning. So, understanding the women's fear as stemming from their yet not knowing what we now know (all the good, the hilariously good, that resurrection implies) won't work for us this morning. We're not supposed to understand them from a distance; we're not supposed to see their fear as misplaced. They are us, and we are them—which means their fear is somehow our fear.

So, what's so fearsome, so frightening about what Easter reveals?

Governor Mike Pence spent Holy Week doing damage control following Indiana's new state law entitled the Religious Freedom Restoration Act. It's been criticized (I think rightly) for the likelihood that it will make discrimination against gay men and lesbians allowable under the law. Following the quickly unfolding story of action and reaction, a local news TV station scouted out businesses that might make use of the law. They stumbled upon a family-owned pizza parlor whose walls were adorned with kitschy crosses, and trained a camera on the young, 2nd generation owner.

She explained her like for the law, and her likely reliance on it if a gay couple ever asked her to cater their wedding. The absurd notion that anyone would have a pizzeria cater his or her wedding only made her look that much less fit for the spotlight.

But, of course, as happens these days, the whole thing went viral, and the umbrage machine that is the internet did its work, and it was only a matter of days before this longtime small business, following threats of harassment and violence, was closed for good—because, you know, when something unjust happens, we just need to find the right person to kill and then kill her, or at least kill off her livelihood, which is (granted) more civilized than crucifixion but comes from the same urge.

Easter reveals that urge as misguided, misguiding, and ultimately destructive, self-destructive. If we had somehow “gotten” Officer Darren Wilson, as Toby suggested, another group would have engaged in their own version of riot, and thus it would have continued. Having “gotten” that woman and her pizzeria, another group has turned to GoFundMe and raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to be given to her personally—she who has probably no notion of what to do with hundreds of thousands of dollars (I certainly wouldn’t) and in any event will never feel quite the same in her own skin. As for the righteous cause that she was bullied about, my guess is she’s been radicalized in the other direction.

The fact is I think a terrible, grotesque thing happened in the killing of Michael Brown (and in so many others like him, *too* many others like him). And I think a terrible thing has happened in the enacting of this law in Indiana. But that just makes the fearsome challenge of Easter that much more fearsome to someone like me: it will serve little good to try to find the right guy to kill and then to kill him. It certainly won’t be in service of the gospel. No, so we must find the better way to establish justice; we must find the gospel way in aim of setting things to right.

As it happens, the word “resurrection” means to set things to right. Hear it in relation to insurrection, which is a violent uprising against an authority; hear it as meaning a gentle, radical, matter-of-fact resetting of things to right in response to the apparent power and authority of death. Resurrection: a response to death as the aggressed final word; yet one that (joyfully? playfully?) disregards death altogether, neither obeying it nor propagating it but simply bypassing it as if it were nothing. The ultimate nothing.

This is the implication of Jesus as the “final sacrifice.” This is the deep challenge of Jesus disciplining his disciples whenever they meant to resort to violence in reaction to the crucifixion—when they heard that it would happen (“God forbid it, Lord!”), when they saw that it was about to

happen (“Put away your sword, Peter”), when they went away distraught for it having happened and locked themselves away for what would happen next. (Would the religious and political authorities be satisfied, or would they come after now the disciples? Would any of the disciples break out of the discipline of peaceful resistance and strike back, which would only cause the authorities to strike back but harder?)

No. That is not how it shall be. This is how it shall be, which Jesus said, his first words as a resurrected one of God: “Peace be with you,” which we should hear not simply as salutation but as command.

We’re fools if this doesn’t frighten us—to know that justice will demand more of us than simply figuring out whom to kill off. Yet we’re fools also if we never move past this fear, if we don’t follow back to the beginning where we might try it again. I mean, we’ve got all this time, and so much forgiveness. We’ve got a lifetime; we’ve got thousands, millions, of lifetimes. And we’ve got to do something with all that time.

Let’s build a cathedral, which won’t be done by the time my life is finished, but which I will have been better off for having helped to build. Stone and light: let’s build something beautiful and true. It’s what Easter would have us do.

Thanks be to God.