

Easter Sunday 2018
Sermon 4.1.18
Scripture: Mark 16:1-9

Are you going to say anything? If you encounter injustice that would be just as easy to pass by, if—no, *when*—you encounter indecency or an attack, are you gonna say anything? To try to bring some righteousness to it all, to try to bring the light of truth: are you going to say something?

Because it might cost you.

That's the question that hangs over the resurrection narrative, according to Mark. Are you going to say anything? Are *they* going to say anything—these women who'd been seized by terror and amazement, and who said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid?

It's odd that this is how the story ends—with the question as to whether they'd say anything, or if they'd say nothing to anyone (for they were afraid.) Because, of course, this is actually a story that has very much been told. This is a story that has definitely broken out beyond the bonds of their “saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” The fact of this gospel narrative is proof that they must have said something to someone. Heck, *we're* proof of that. So something happened between their first instinct to say nothing to anyone (and because of their fear) and their saying something to someone because of their...what? Conviction? Courage? Faith?

The fear these women felt when encountering the empty tomb: it was a fear of the claim that the resurrection had just laid on them, but I've always thought otherwise. I've always thought (for as long as I've thought about it) that the fear was about the sheer *unnaturalness* of it all. People live and then they die, and when they're buried, they stay buried. And it's sad—the stubborn fact of death. Sometimes, it's terribly sad, as I know it *has* been for some in this very room, even this very year. It might also be terrifying, as it was in the case of crucifixion. This was a public act of a state-terror. It was to cow the people from their insurrective ways, to make them more governable and easier to oppress. But death: it's also predictable—except in this case.

And I've always thought this is why they were afraid. They'd come bearing spices, after all, that they might anoint the body for a proper burial. They'd been unable to do so immediately following his death because his body had been released as a favor to a man of stature, Joseph of Arimethea, who didn't then take the time. And they'd been unable to do it on the day after his death for it having been the Sabbath and so a day reserved for domesticity and rest. But now, they

could come, their only obstacle being that stone, which preoccupied them. How would they roll it away? With no question in their minds other than the technicalities of how they'd accomplish their task, they'd come expecting death.

That they didn't encounter it, then: I'd always thought this is why they were afraid. But the story tells us their response to this; *Mark* tells us their response to this. At this, they were alarmed. At the stone rolled away, at the young man seated on the right side and dressed in a white robe, at the absence of the body: at this they were alarmed. Their fear, though: that didn't set in until a bit later.

Some sources would insist that this storied fear would pass, that this certainly wouldn't be the note on which the gospel narrative should end. This fear, this which is here given the final word: some sources insist that this was the result of a mistake—a mistake of history by which the real ending was lost, or a mistake on the part of the writer who failed to bring the story to full closure. (But what if he didn't want full closure? What if he wanted to leave an opening?) In sum, much of Christian tradition would conclude that this story ended wrong.

And so, most Bibles have two additional sections. One's called the "Shorter Ending of Mark," and it includes verses in which Peter is restored to respectability and the final word is of eternal salvation. The next is added to that, called "The Longer Ending of Mark," and it includes cursory treatment of things written of in the later gospels of Luke and Mathew—an encounter with Mary the Magdalene, a resurrection appearance to two disciples walking along a road, Jesus commissioning the disciples, and then Jesus ascending to heaven.

But these passages bear none of the telltale signs of Mark's writing and conviction, and include vocabulary that appears nowhere else in Mark's gospel. Worse, though, they undermine the urgency of Mark's intent here—the intent to beg a question, "What are you going to do about it?" and to underscore that something real is at risk. This implied risk, you'll notice, is assuaged when the final word of the gospel is that of eternal salvation, and this risk is all but erased when we depart the world at thought of the resurrection of Jesus, when we imagine just a safe ascension for him back to the Father. True as those things might be, assured indeed as we are to be of the promise of eternal salvation and of the truth of Jesus, the victory of life now won, seated at the right hand of the Father, Mark's gospel has always been a stubbornly of-the-world one, and Mark's Jesus has always been insistently all about the world.

This world as one in which an enemy force has come to reign in occupation, this world that labors under the crush of empire, the heartbreak of injustice, the threat of death, even state-sponsored terror whose name this week is Stephon; this world which God longs to bring back to God-self that there might be justice and freedom for the people: this is central to what Mark had in mind in committing the stories of his faith to writing. Indeed, Mark's gospel is a particularly political one, and Mark's Jesus is particularly concerned with how people structure their lives together—economically, socially, in governance and law, in policy and policing, all stuff very much of this world. For this reason, it's a departure from that pressing conviction to live in discipleship amidst this beloved, troubled world when the resurrection of Jesus would have us in our minds departing for heaven.

And this is especially the case when Jesus himself has had us think in terms not of heaven but of Galilee.

Galilee: the place where that earliest call to discipleship first touched down in the world. Galilee, that place where the gospel began: there it would begin again. The women, then, according to the original ending of this story that actually never ends: they were to go and tell the disciples and Peter that they should return to Galilee, for there they would see him, just as he'd said.

And this is when the terror and amazement struck them. This is when the fear set in—not when they met with the unnaturally unexpected, but when they were told something they'd already been told. Jesus had told them, which the man in white made clear. “He is ahead of you in Galilee, just as he told them.” This is when the fear set in, when they suddenly had a fuller understanding now of what discipleship entails, when they suddenly had a complete understanding of what it would mean to follow Christ.

The cross.

No mere talk anymore, no mere forewarning, the true cost of discipleship has been laid bare to them. Jesus walked the way of the gospel. Jesus led them in resistance to imperial power and unjust occupation of the government and ill treatment of simple, common human beings. And then he was crucified. And now we was back, beginning again in Galilee to walk this same way that those who would follow him would now know most fully what following means.

The cross not as some figurative thing, but as a terribly real thing: now the women and the disciples would all understand what it means be a friend and follower of Jesus.

And they felt exactly what they should have felt upon that realization: fear.

And they left open the question as to whether they'd take up that task, saying nothing to anyone for they were afraid.

You know, that man who was clothed in a white robe and seated on the right side, we've seen him before—or *I think we have anyway*, and I'm not alone. Ched Myers, in his landmark book *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, claims this man in the empty tomb is the same man who was noted to have been following Jesus at the time of his arrest. So noted just after all the remaining eleven disciples had deserted Jesus and fled, this "certain young man was following, wearing nothing but a linen cloth. They caught hold of him," it's claimed of the authorities who'd just arrested Jesus. "They caught hold of him but he left the linen cloth and ran off naked."

To be naked, of course, is to be the very picture of shame. But that out of which he slipped naked, that linen cloth: it would be recalled in the linen cloth that Joseph of Arimthea is said to have used for wrapping Jesus' body just before laying it in the tomb. It would also be recalled in the cloth this mysterious man sitting on the right side in the tomb is said to be wearing. But now it's gleaming white—like the gleam of Jesus at the Transfiguration just following when he'd begun to speak of the cross, like the gleam of the robed martyrs in the book of Revelation. This gleam: it's the sanctification of those who've sacrificed or would soon sacrifice.

Myers explains: "Some commentators have argued that this [man following and then fleeing naked] is a disconnected episode in which the author's 'signature' upon the work can be detected [as if this were an ironic self-reference on Mark's part.] Others attribute it to vivid eye-witness detail in the tradition." To Myers, though, "The young man who flees after the authorities try to seize him along with Jesus, is a symbol of the discipleship community as a whole, which has just itself fled."

In other words, that fleeing, naked man, the very picture of shame, is the church.

But so is this: that perhaps same man, now seated on the right, which is to say seated in the very place the disciples had once bickered over that each might occupy it—on the right side of Jesus in glory; that perhaps same man, though now dressed in a linen transfigured to gleaming white,

which is to say the garment revealed for those who'd give their lives for the sake of the gospel. This perhaps same man "evokes," according to Mr. Myers, "both amazement and terror. Hope, in that he once joined in the naked shame of abandonment [and]...terror, in that his new clothes are that of a martyr figure."

And then Mr. Myers wonders what Mark seems also to wonder: "Is the disciple [—the hearer of this gospel story, the reader of this gospel story, the gathered would-be faithful—are these] also willing to undergo such a transformation?" In short, are we willing to undergo the transformation from fleeing in fear to following in faith, no matter the cost?

It should be said here that the resurrection of Jesus suggests some very good news for us. That death is not the final word, is not some fearsome thing of non-being or annihilation; that life is not constrained to zero-sum realities wherein more for you means less for me, that life is instead open to a reality more gracious than that, more magnanimous than we can even imagine: the resurrection of Jesus means our following him is not in vain but is powerful to save from loneliness and despair, from unending violence and deep-seated hatred, from injustice that insists falsely on its own truth, from the sin that is too heavy for us to carry and too deep for us to undo.

It should also be said, though, that the resurrection of Jesus speaks fearsome things to us. That we are not to give up, nor to give in; that we are not to accept deception as if it were fact, we're not to accept lies as if they were truth, we're not to settle for "law and order" as if such a thing were justice: the resurrection impresses upon us things that we'd perhaps rather not think about on Easter—Easter, of all days. After all, this is a day when we're to be at our decorous best. We've dressed up for this. I've put on make-up. Really, we might have some visitors among us and we don't want to turn anyone off.

On the other hand, to suggest that our mission as a resurrection people is anything other than pressing and crucial and of some very high stakes is to betray the truth of it. Our world is mired in injustice. People groan under the yoke of oppression. The whole creation yearns for shalom but suffers exploitation and violence—spectacular violence and mundane, everyday, ordinary violence. And we need as many people to join in this costly effort as can summon the courage.

So, whether this is your first Easter celebration, or your eighty-first, or somewhere in between, I invite you as Julia Esquivel did first: "...Join us in this vigil /and you will know what it is

to dream! / Then you will know how marvelous it is / to live threatened with Resurrection! / To dream awake, / to keep watch asleep, / to live while dying, / and to know ourselves already resurrected!”

In this, it is so—happy Easter and thanks be to God.