

Easter Day, 2009

Lections: Acts 10:34-43; I Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

In the name of the One who creates beauty from chaos,
The One who exposes our violence,
The One who moves within and beyond us,
Who lives to disturb and heal and love. Amen.

This Easter morning our glorious music and physical space do much to give life to the tree that once was dead. We claim new and resurrected life in the cross of Jesus. Martin Smith says in Nativities and Passions, that the “cross kills our deadness and sterility, not our life. What we risk by drawing near to the cross is not dying. We risk coming alive.” That is no small task as our headlines this week reveal such heartbreak in Italy, in the Toronto Children’s Hospital, and in the self sacrifice of a ship captain off the coast of Somalia.

We risk coming alive in ways we don’t expect. Peter, in our first lesson from Acts, came alive in his acceptance of all others. “Truly, I perceive that God shows no partiality,” he says. That is a remarkable statement, a coming alive from someone who thought he was part of the true and only chosen people. Paul, in our second lesson, came alive in that which he sought to destroy. He began as a fundamentalist seeking the death of infidels. And, in today’s gospel, women coming to the tomb, expecting dead things to remain dead and finding instead a terrifying threshold and an empty, hollowed out place.

Mark’s gospel in this its original ending, has no resurrection appearances although some were added later by those who couldn’t believe that this was what Mark intended, an abrupt and overwhelming terror at crossing a threshold that is open-ended into new life.

Breaking open the word on Easter Day is always a challenge – to speak about the resurrection is to talk about something larger than anything we can fit into our consciousness says one priest. If I am to give you a truth today that can be spoken, it is that Christianity is for those who have some staying power. This faith of ours is not for the faint of heart, faint of spirit, or the faint of mind and strength. Our growth in faith is a continual process, a series of deaths and resurrections, of stones being moved, of strange words and directions to follow, and ultimately of hiddenness and mystery. It takes courage to keep at it.

If we are a part of this cosmic drama, a part of the path and pattern of Jesus, then we must deal with today’s disturbing gospel ending. “So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” The Greek ending is more blunt, “they were terrified, you see.” The hard truth is that this abruptness, this difficult note of suspense and fear, and probably disobedience, is not what we expect. This is where Mark ends so it is no surprise that in the face of what God has done in and through Jesus we come to the end of our knowledge.

Many of us have been here often this week. Taking our place in the faith history of the centuries, many came to each of the liturgies. While we doubled the turnout for most services from last year, today is our principal joy, the fullest beauty, the most familiar hymns. We have not come expecting discomfort and uncertainty. Certainly there are not many of us who would choose fear and trembling for Easter.

I have come to love Mark's troublesome ending with frightened women, boulders moved and a gaping hole. I've even come to love the strange young man with a message I am still working to distill. Some of you have come to Easter Day with gaping holes in your own lives. Some of you are frightened and trembling in the face of what you did not expect. Some of you have come dragging the crosses of false expectations, terrible woundings, betrayals of trust, abandonments. Some of you do not expect to risk coming alive.

I remember clearly the year my daughters found a small egg dropped from a nest. They tried to hatch it with a lamp and a bit of soft tissues. They hoped it would produce a winged thing and new life. But sadly it only produced a bad smell and terrible disappointment. I am not sure I was adequate in trying to explain it all.

I think the Church has often failed people by moving away too quickly from the reality of pain and suffering, bad smells and false expectations. We have been in a rush to resurrection and we have said it is an event and not a process. We even rush past the death of Jesus – he's dead, no, he isn't. Anyone who has stood at a graveside knows that death is very real and grief is not momentary even if we are Christians. I believe that there are many deaths and many risings, and that our challenge in fear and trembling is to practice resurrection, often. And we will need God's help for that.

We may be less sure these days about God, about what faith looks like for us. We are coming to the limits of our rational and knowledge-based faith. We cannot take for granted that we know what is needed, or even that we know the whole truth. I have yet to read The Gospel of Judas, co-written by a former parishioner. I haven't read the book entitled The Resurrection of Mary Magdalene....I am still working on the resurrection of Jesus.

So in this faith, there are places where I am at home and there are places where I am left as bewildered as the women at the tomb. I know that this Markan gospel ending is a threshold place; the future of it is open-ended and sometimes I don't like that for I am afraid that it requires too much of me. This threshold place is beyond our knowing. It is a place of possibility and great wonder. It is the place of mystery, the wondrous mystery of God. It is in the emptiness, the hollowed-out place meant for burial that is open, opened by God for the filling, for discovering that in the hollow place is Love. In that hollow place God works.

But can you imagine having been through so much with Jesus and thinking that it was over and maybe even time to rest, they were told that discipleship continues and they

must begin again, even back to Galilee. Not what anyone was expecting. Not knowing if the Galilee experience will in any way resemble what had been.

Death is not the end of us, says Bruce Chilton in his book, Jesus the Rabbi, but it is the end of who we think we are. Death was not the end of Jesus. “He remains a measure of how much we dare to see and feel the divine in our lives...Jesus invites us to meet him in that dangerous and terrifying place where we know our weakness and fragility, where we are willing to have the new life of God blossom in us.” Chilton goes on to say that Jesus never claimed that he was unique. His ‘abba’ was the abba of all. And his work – the meals, the signs, the healings were not for himself alone or for demonstrating his personal power or gaining adulation. His work was undertaken to open for us the gate to God, to invite us across a threshold where we might enter the kingdom, the realm, the reign of God, the place of fullness and new life.

So much energy has been spent keeping Jesus in the tomb, rolling the stone back in place so that he might be fixed, stationary, tamed and dead. But Jesus is freed, alive beyond our best explanations. He is freed to be among us in all the common places of meal and lakeside, in gardens, among children and those in need of tenderness. He is freed to be transformed by God. And so are we.

Tell me about a time when you rose from the dead. Tell me a story about a time when you crossed a threshold not knowing anything at all. Tell me you are practicing resurrection. And so am I. Amen+

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