

Easter Message 2020

(Preached from home amidst the pandemic)

I invite you to remember that the women who had followed Jesus to the cross on Friday didn't know that he had been resurrected. On Sunday morning they showed up at the tomb with the spices to finish anointing the body of their teacher. This was women's work. The men were hiding in their homes.

And as they walked through the empty streets of Jerusalem in the early dawn, they asked a very practical question: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" They had the most difficult task they'd ever faced ahead of them, and they couldn't even get started because the obstacles were so great. Who would roll away the stone?

Questions in Scripture are important. Jesus asked questions of those who followed him. Why are you afraid? Do you believe I can do this? And because the biblical narrative is also about us, the questions address us as well. Who will roll away the stone *for us*? When it feels like grief is smothering us, who will roll away the stone? When the weight of addiction is smothering us or a loved one, who will chip away the stone? When the heaviness of mental illness descends upon us or a loved one, how will that stone be managed? When the weight of injustice keeps people from being all God created them to be, how do we gather together to move the stone? The women asked, Who will roll away the stone so we can even get started to do what we need to do?

The gospel writers are so intentional in their wording. Did you notice that when they arrive at the tomb, they "look up?" In Mark's gospel, whenever Jesus "looks up" he is about to do a mighty work. Before he multiplies the loaves and fishes, he looks up in thanksgiving. When he touches the deaf man's ears, he looks up in prayer. The first time Jesus touches the blind man's eyes, he looks up with expectation. Looking up in Mark's Gospel is a sign that something surprising is about to happen.

So the women *look up* when they get to the tomb. But that surprising thing has already taken place. They see that the stone, which was very large, has already been rolled back. And then they notice a young man, dressed in a white robe,

sitting on the right side of where the body of Jesus should have been lying. And Mark says, they were alarmed.

Wouldn't we be? What's going on? The stone has been rolled away, maybe by grave-robbers. Maybe somebody has stolen his body. They are certainly not thinking resurrection.

And yet God has made sure that the stone will not be an obstacle to resurrection. God is the God who helps us roll away the stones. And God provides us with community to help us roll away the stones together. The angel says, "Do not be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him."

Notice that what the angel describes is an open space. *He is not here*. In John's account of the resurrection, there is a presence there. Mary Magdalene *meets* Jesus on that first Easter. He's not in the tomb, but he is there in the garden.

In Mark's account, the angel tells of *an open space*. He is *not* here. There is the place they laid him. And I wonder if that feels more like the reality in which we live. We live in open space. We live by faith. We weren't there to walk the dusty roads of Galilee with Jesus. We weren't there to see an empty tomb. We live our lives by faith.

The angel declares an open space. How true that is in our lives. In this era of a pandemic, as in all eras, we are not given much to be certain of in life. But we are given a promise. Along with the open space (he is not here) the angel delivers a promise: "But 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."

The promise is that we will meet Jesus. And where is he? As usual, he is ahead of us. He has already moved forward. He's blazing a trail. He's working in the world; he's in the cry of the poor and the suffering. He's out where the pain and the sorrow and the injustice are. He is there with me in my suffering.

The angel says to them, Go find Jesus ahead of you in Galilee. We *find* Jesus when we move out into the future, when we move ahead into new territory, when we discover him in people we haven't met yet. There we will see him, just as he told us.

The disciples won't see Jesus if they stay in Jerusalem. They will find him *as they go* to meet him in Galilee. He's already ahead of them.

And do you notice who they are supposed to share this news with? The disciples *and Peter*. Peter is named specifically. Why is that? Because at Jesus' trial, when people ask Peter three times if he knows Jesus, if he is a follower of that man, if he is a disciple, Peter says, No. He is afraid to align himself, and who can blame him. His life is at stake.

But that's why Peter needs to hear his name in the roll call. Tell the disciples *and Peter*: Peter who gave up his discipleship, Peter, who let fear control his life. Peter gets another chance. It is good news indeed that God gives us another chance, and another after that. Go tell the disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee. I wonder what that second chance is you need right now.

And how do the women receive this news? Do they rejoice and say, Wonderful! Let's get going! No, Mark says, "They went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." That is not only how this story ends, it is how the Gospel of Mark ends.

Apparently some Christians who came along later than Mark were so unsatisfied with the ending, with its abruptness, ending with fear, that they wrote two other endings. We think that because the Greek is so different, and that suggests that these were different writers. But this apparently was the way Mark wanted to end the Gospel, with fear and amazement.

Obviously we are here today, so we know this isn't the end of the story. The women did tell the other disciples; they did share this great news of resurrection. They did meet Jesus in Galilee. Maybe Mark is saying to us, there is unfinished business here, so you finish the story! Peter, you who denied Jesus, go and receive another chance! You disciples, who fled in fear, go into uncharted territory, knowing that the risen Christ is with you.

Everyone who comes along after these first disciples: you finish the story! Go and meet Jesus on the road ahead of you. He'll be in the stranger who needs a welcome, he'll be in the immigrant, he'll be in the car camper; he'll be in the one who has been discriminated against. I'm not making that up. That's what Jesus

says he'll judge the nations on at the final judgment in Matthew 25. Jesus says: I've gone ahead of you. Come out and find me.

I also hope you'll notice that when the women flee, they flee in terror *and* amazement. They are not just afraid; they are afraid and amazed. They hold a mixture of emotions. And that is so often the way we are. There were things that we could have been fearful of before this corona virus pandemic. But the women were living with fear and amazement. We are amazed at the grace and power and presence of God. We've got a story to share of God's faithfulness; we hear stories of God at work in others. We are a mixture of fear and amazement. And that's OK. We are a work in progress. God isn't done with us yet.

Will Willimon writes about this story of resurrection from Mark's gospel. He pictures Jesus showing up in our well-ordered lives, Jesus who impatiently keeps moving ahead of us. He imagines these scenarios: "We were just following the order of worship, going through the motions (and all so decently and in order), exactly the same as every Sunday, a gathering something akin to Kiwanis or the Tuesday afternoon book club.

But before we even had the offering, the guest of honor got up and left in a huff. Next thing we know, he's out front haranguing those on the sidewalk, "It's a sin what they've done to Sunday! Anybody want to do Easter?" ...

We were following helpful spiritual practices, keeping Sabbath, centering, settling in, chilling out, focusing on higher things, breathing more intentionally, enjoying prayer as yoga.

Just as everyone finally assumed the lotus position, Christ got up, hit the door with full force and was gone. "Wake up! Be dangerous! Sabbath was made for humanity!" he shouted in a voice loud enough to wake the dead.

We were exercising servant leadership, exerting a positive influence on the community, uplifting the morals of the youth, caring for one another, helping folks make it through the week, affirming family values, embodying entrepreneurial leadership, instilling a positive attitude, pursuing a purpose-filled life.

I heard him groan, sigh, fidget with his sandals then arise and shout, “I need some air! Call me if any of you ever get the courage to go crazy.”...

We were just sealing him safe and sound in the tomb, just making sure that the gravesite was tidy, just getting adjusted to life without him, just obeying the soldiers, just accommodating ourselves to death and defeat.

Not waiting for dawn, Christ got up, rolled away the stone, strode forth shining before our fearful faces and commanded, “Get up!”

He wouldn't stay anywhere long -- peripatetic, frenetic, rabbi on the run -- nor will he be deterred, even by death.

And then Willimon says: “The most curious quality of salvation by Jesus is his refusal to stay put. If we will worship him, be with him, we must go with him. We must be willing to relocate. All ministry in the name of Jesus is itinerant.” (Faith and Leadership, April 6, 2009)

I wonder how God will use this pandemic to change us, and rearrange us, and call us into new ways of being church for the sake of the world. The living Christ is on the move. Let's go join him! Amen.