

Easter Sunday 2021
Sermon 4.4.21

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, ‘Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?’ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, ‘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. 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.’ So 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. (202)

Happy Easter, everyone. Happy Resurrection Day. Or, if not happy, then at least somewhat hopeful. Though today might not be the Easter of our dreams, it does feel like one of the last remaining days of a prior darkness. Spring is nigh. Yes, snow will still visit itself upon us from time to time. But spring is coming. Vaccinations continue apace. Yes, COVID numbers are up, and high-ranking people at the CDC are full of portent that we must continue to exercise caution—masking, distancing, not gathering in big groups indoors for any length of time. But we could have a much better spring this year than last, and an almost-normal summer. The school year might begin in late August, back to normal.

I am so tired. Lots of people are. Pandemic fatigue. There was an article in the *Times* yesterday about it. I didn’t read it.

Most times when it’s Mark’s year to tell the Easter story, I feel a little guilty. It’s so anticlimactic. It’s so ill-suited to the celebration that swirls all around it. As the beating heart of this festal day, this event—the occurrence of the empty tomb—as Mark presents it is almost offensive. I want to apologize to the people in church who’d put in such an effort. As the worship leader, I always feel like someone who’s invited a friend to come along to party I’m about to attend, and the party turns out to be a bummer.

Sorry about that.

There is no joy here, no rejoicing.

There is no *Jesus* here, even if to be mistaken for the gardener as Mary Magdalene did according to the gospel of John—which, incidentally, is always an option.

Even the possible angel is described as a young man, just a young man.

Otherwise, there’s just emptiness and fear, amazement, yes, but also terror.

Alleluia?

So, yes, there's always the option to use John's version of the resurrection, no matter whether it's Year A for Matthew, Year B for Mark, or Year C for Luke. And so, I have exercised that Johannine option, and, always when I do, it's in order to avoid Mark.

This year, though, there's something just right about this remembering of the story—that Easter isn't the equivalent of an exclamation point. Full stop! It's more like the song we just heard, the finale for the musical—the pains of dying, the sorrow at the death, the wonder of life beyond that, and then a return to the beginning: “Prepare the way!”

See, Easter isn't an arrival. Easter isn't even a high-point way-station. Actually, Easter is nearly nothing, a day following a day, like the day upon day that many of us have moved through during quarantine. Really, the Resurrection of Jesus is just a setting back up something that has fallen over. *Sugere* is Latin for rising up or setting up, *re-sugere* means simply to put back up again. It's what gives us “resurgence.” It's what gives us “resurrection.” Cruel death at the hands of the powers and principalities has knocked Jesus down, and God has set Jesus back up.

So, go back to Galilee, where it all began—the kingdom of God having come near. Go back, for there you'll see him, and from there you can once again go after him, follow in his way.

It's significant that, according to Mark, Jesus was crucified between “two bandits.” The Greek used here, translated “bandits,” was a word often meant to name freedom-fighters, insurrectionists. The book that some have been reading through this Holy Week notes this. *The Last Week: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus' Final Days in Jerusalem* tells us that the presence of these two insurrectionists in the story “remind us that crucifixion was used specifically for people who systematically refused to accept Roman imperial authority.”

For what it's worth, this is historically probable. Not everything you read in the gospel narratives is. But this is: that there would have been insurrectionists active. We're going on two centuries now of imperial provocation and popular reaction. There was a lot of zeal among the Jews around the turn of that millennium. The Maccabees are the best known of these, their rebellion against the emperor of their day even celebrated: Hannukah. But they were hardly alone. Really, their being received as heroes could be thought only to have emboldened others over the two or three centuries to follow. There were always a few insurrectionists to crucify.

But there's more—for not only does the presence of these two, one on Jesus' right and the other on his left, suggest to us the high cost of such decisive, and usually violent, uprising, it also

might be felt as laying before us two modes of resistance: armed insurrection and divine resurrection.

Armed insurrection, an uprising from within to unsettle oppressive, imprisoning worldly authority, or divine resurrection, a setting back up to right something that has toppled over—or been *pushed* over.

Two modes: violent insurrection and inspired resurrection. All we need is faith, faith in that inspired resurrection—that it will come, that it is real. Very, very substantive faith.

I haven't been watching the trial of Derek Chauvin. I can't. I can't. I don't have it in me.

I'm not alone, apparently. There are lots of others who can't, too. An article out yesterday featured more than a few, though these all Black. Headlined "Chauvin's trial leaves many Black viewers emotionally taxed," this put on the record many Black Americans representing all regions of our country.

"I had to mute the TV," said Lisa Harris, a woman my age from outside Detroit. "Hearing Mr. Floyd continue to say he can't breathe and call for his mother — it was a lot. It's been a lot to watch."

Marlene Gillings-Gayle, a retired school teacher in New York, said she had planned not to watch the trial to preserve her peace of mind. But she's found herself watching almost all of it. She's had to force herself to go outside and take walks. "I'm trying not to be pissed, because we've been here and done that too many times." She "ponders what Floyd's killing and the way the trial has unfolded so far says about America and its values."

Kyra Walker explained, "I had a moment where I just felt broken and I started thinking about Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor and how in such a short time frame, it was like one Black death after the other, without a break." She worries about her 11-year-old son. "I realized I just didn't have it in me to watch all this," she said.

Then there are the witnesses, the young woman, a teenager at the time, who filmed Floyd's last moments. She told the courtroom she stays "up nights apologizing to George Floyd," as if there's anything she could have done that wouldn't have resulted in more violence, likely against her, and then what?

Insurrection.

As for me, I can't watch because I imagine it will present with two options, and I strongly suspect I'd long for the wrong one.

But maybe in this case, that would be the right one...?

Maybe, just this one last time, a little insurrection...?

How else are we going to make this alright?

You think you know how the crucifixion functions, right? You think you know: Jesus' crucifixion functions as substitute. We are guilty of sin. God is angry about that. But our sin is so great that we can't ourselves pay the cost of making it alright. So, Jesus did it in our place—Jesus the perfect, Jesus the sinless. His was such an offering without blemish that only this could assuage God's wrath in our regard.

This is the theory of substitutionary atonement, or penal atonement. It was developed in the 11th century by Anselm of Canterbury, and for reasons I can't explain it has remained dominant for the ensuing millennium. This, in spite of the fact that there are logical disjoints, not to mention theological mis-assertions. I mean, how can we be guilty of sin when sin is something that pervades? How do you avoid participating in something that pervades? And what sort of god would require the death of anything, not least his own son, in order to come to forgiveness and mercy as regards his own children, all the people of his making? Any earthly father with such demands would be thought a monster. So, why would such a thing be a quality of the one who is Lord and Father of all, who is also love and creative grace?

The thing is, it's not strictly scriptural, and it certainly isn't Markan. Mark doesn't say anything over the course of his gospel narrative that would suggest this is how the crucifixion functions, this is how it saves us from a world of sin.

What he does say is that Jesus "came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." And consider, ransom isn't the same thing as expiation.

John Getty was a kid in my sister's high school class at Exeter, two years older than me. The grandson of J. Paul Getty, the nephew of John Paul Getty III who was kidnapped in 1973, Paul was a rich kid—reckless, sort of sexy, sort of scary, sort of pathetic. His uncle's kidnappers had demanded \$17 million in ransom, but the patriarch of the family refused to pay it. It's thought, of course, that he had it, just refused to let it go.

All this was in the vague cloud of my understanding of this kid, who eventually got kicked out of Exeter for cheating off my sister on a math test, probably to land amidst some other boarding school and eventually, decades later, just a few months ago in fact, dying at his home in Los Angeles of an accidental drug overdose. Fentanyl.

I always sort of wondered, whenever thought turned to him, if this is how things play out when you're dealing with a patriarch who refuses to pay the ransom.

I'm happy to report I have no experience being in such a family—neither my family of origin nor my family of faith.

The Greek word for this is *lutron* and it appears in the Bible always in the context of captives being liberated, never in the context of payment for sin. A *lutron* is a means of liberation from bondage and it seems, based on the larger story Mark tells and the way he tells it, that the entity to which we might be understood as in bondage is the powers and principalities, the domination systems that always come to dominate systematically. No matter how we try at revolution, the tables merely turn and someone else is at the head. No matter how we try at insurrection, the violence gets a toehold and doesn't stop until it comes for us or those we love. Political oppression coupled with economic exploitation and gaining religious legitimation, these domination systems can be like prison bars that keep us from ever reaching beyond them, a prison cell so securely locked that we can't even see the sky, to say nothing of reaching it.

The crucifixion functions to show what confronting these powers and principalities can come to, what resisting life on the terms of these domination systems can come to. It's horrifying. These things will stop at nothing to maintain their power, or at best to maintain stability.

But social order isn't so bad, right? I mean, it's better than its lack. At least the trains run on time.

So, just keep your head down. Even if you don't opt for insurrection, you can just keep your head down. "God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you," Peter said when Jesus first started talking about the crucifixion. Maybe he wasn't do wrong to insist this...?

That said, Jesus wasn't about to go along with that. "Get behind me," was his reply to Peter. "You're setting your mind on human things, not divine things."

The crucifixion functions to reveal at what cost this would come.

The empty tomb functions to tell us that Jesus yet lives, that Jesus is Lord, and that our following in his way will come to us as the liberation he would spend his treasure to win—his life so he might have us close, have us free, have us rise and insist upon his gracious way.

Soar we now where Christ hath led, foll'wing our exalted Head.

Made like Him, like Him we rise. Ours the cross, the grave, the skies!

Alleluia!

If this doesn't frighten us, then we haven't really thought it through. If we don't though long for it, then we haven't fully understood what life absent this could degrade to become.

How I wish for us all that we could have had the Easter morning we likely wanted. There's just nothing as glorious as singing all together, "Alleluia!" It ringing all around us. It rising up from within us. But no one at the tomb that first day according to Mark had even the faintest "Alleluia" in them. It would come, just not yet.