



Massanutten

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

When an Ending Begins Again

A Sermon Preached by John P. Leggett

April 12, 2009

Easter Sunday (Year B)

Mark 16:1-8

Every year Easter breaks into the midst of our lives with its joyful refrain: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And every year we put on our best and tune our alleluia voices so that we can join the countless host who have announced that death-shattering and life-giving news down through the generations. I suspect—if you listen closely—your heart can hear that Easter song sounding from the lips of God’s people as it echoes through the ages, and it is their song of resurrection that bears us on wings of hope. And, of course, the companion truth is that God will use our witness to the resurrection to give life to those who surround us now and those who will take their place in generations to come.

One of my favorite Easter prayers has turned the word “Easter” into a verb, and it asks God to “Easter us in joy and strength.” While that prayer always has power for me, I have discovered that this Easter it speaks more powerfully than ever. I can’t help but think that it’s because joy and strength are so noticeably absent from many of our lives this year. So many of us and those we love look for all the world like those women who make their way to the tomb. The way they walked, the words they spoke, the questions they asked—all of it together shouting “no joy” and “no strength.”

Have you noticed that too? A war that drags on; an economy that stretches our budgets and makes us fear for our jobs; the prayer list growing longer with names of people we care about; the death of people who love—all of these things have combined this year to sap our strength and take away our joy. And so the prayer dares to ask God to Easter us in joy and strength, for God to come and set things right. If Easter is about anything, it is about God’s power to give life and to overturn anything that threatens or destroys life, even death.

A couple of years ago, an HBO series which had been on the air about five seasons was ending. Millions tuned in for the final episode, but few were ready for what happened. As that final episode drew to its close, the final scene built with incredible power as viewers kept imagining how it would end. The scene was set in a diner, with a character seated at one of the tables. Every time the door to the diner opened, a bell would ring. And the character would look up, wondering who was entering next. As the seconds before the ending ticked away, the door opened one more time, the bell rang, the person sitting at the table looked up, and then—without another word—without any warning—the screen cut to black. This was no fade to black. It was stark. It just ended. Across the country, viewers jumped up to run toward their televisions to see what had gone wrong. Others, thinking it was some terrible cable glitch, picked up the phone give the cable company a piece of their mind. But there were no glitches. The story simply ended. No matter how unsettling it may have been, it just ended.

Some people feel that sense of outrage when they read Mark’s Gospel. It, too, just

ends. After all of that time marching toward the cross, Mark doesn't seem to know what to do after it. Mark gives us 119 verses detailing the suffering and death of Jesus, but he only gives us 8 verses of resurrection. And they are slim at best. That's why some read the Mark's gospel faithfully to the end, and come away feeling cheated by the abrupt ending. It's as if Mark simply cuts to black, and we are left speechless along with the women at the tomb.

All of the other gospels—Matthew and Luke and John—give us more details. In each of them we get to hear from Jesus himself. We eat breakfast with Jesus by the seashore. We watch him pass through locked doors. We hear Jesus say to us: “Peace be with you.” We listen to Jesus give the church its instructions: “Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations.” All of the other gospels have neat beginnings and tidy conclusions, and they leave nothing to chance as they describe their encounters with the Risen Lord.

But not Mark. He simply describes the women walking toward the tomb to prepare the body of Jesus for burial. We hear the voice of the man dressed in the white robe proclaim the news: He is not here. He has been raised just like he said. Go and tell the disciples that he will meet them in Galilee. But, as Mark tells it, the women fled from the tomb, for fear and amazement had overtaken them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

What are we to make of a gospel ending on such a note? What could we possibly say about a gospel that ends with this? “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.” That doesn't give the church much room for our resounding Easter alleluias. As one preacher famously said of Mark's Easter story—“That's no way to run a resurrection.” What then are we to say about it?

One thing we could say is this: the women fled in fear and said nothing to anyone because they didn't understand what resurrection meant. The experience was so shocking and new, so overwhelming, that it was more than they could handle. In other words, the women were afraid because they didn't understand the resurrection at all.

And to be honest, there is at least a possibility—even a strong possibility—that it's true. After all, it is impossible for us, for any of us, to *understand* the resurrection.

But we could also say something else. We could just as easily say it like this: the women were afraid, *not* because they didn't understand the resurrection, but because they *did*. What if terror and amazement seized the women not because they didn't realize what resurrection meant, but because they sensed the world would never be the same again? They knew that God had done more than roll away the stone. In the resurrection, God had rolled away all that is false about the world, throwing open a curtain to reveal life as it is meant to be. No wonder they were afraid: they knew that resurrection changed everything about the world they knew.

Do we believe that? Do we believe that resurrection changes everything, anything?

Think about it. If death, the one absolute certainty of our lives has been overturned, what does that do to all of the other certainties we cling to?

Which do we believe: “I can never forgive him!” or resurrection?

“She’ll never change!” or resurrection?

“The war will never end” or resurrection?

“We’ll never find a cure” or resurrection?

“We can never make this marriage work” or resurrection?

“The church will never be one” or resurrection?

Which do we believe? Which do we believe?

To consider that the women may have been afraid because they sensed that the world would never be the same cuts to the very heart of our lives. It forces us to decide if we believe—really believe—that the God who raised Jesus from death to life can do the same for us and all the world and make real the new kingdom whose fullness we await. To say we understand at least a part of the resurrection is to force us to challenge the myriad stones we think will never be removed, stones built by our own sinfulness. Stones we’ve grown accustomed to. It forces us to move beyond our indifference, to stop thinking that what we do doesn’t matter, to stop believing that nothing will ever change in the church or in the world.

In fact, it forces us to believe that resurrection changes everything, even us, and that somehow, no matter what the circumstances of life suggest, God’s purpose will win out. Love will be proven stronger than hate; hope more real than despair; life more powerful than death.

There was a youth in my first church out of seminary who was an amazingly talented pianist and song-writer. Not only could he put all the notes in the right places, but he also grasped the theological possibilities in what he wrote. I am thinking now of a song he wrote for the piano as a postlude that he played at the General Assembly one year. He wrote it in such a way that it seemed to be calling for one more note. I remember his excitement in playing it for me, and asking at the end, “Did you hear that? Did you hear it asking you to finish the song? To sound the next note?”

That’s sort of what Mark does with the end of his gospel. He sounds his final note but you can hear the gospel begging for more to be played. And, if you read Mark’s Gospel through, what you will discover is that this question is there right from the beginning. And, while the disciples in his gospel almost always come across bumbling and not too bright—they just don’t get it in Mark—you sense that Mark keeps thinking someone’s going to get it right sometime. Mark keeps hoping for a faithful disciple who does what a disciple is supposed to do. And so, as the women run from the tomb without saying anything to anyone, you can almost hear Mark asking us who listen now: What about you? How will you respond? Will you be the one to bear the witness that Christ is risen?

You see, for Mark the resurrection isn’t an answer, but the final question. In Mark, the resurrection becomes an invitation to discipleship, to meet the risen Lord in the places he goes before us. And the good news is that there is no place that we can go that Jesus has not already gone to meet us. From the economic crisis, to the unfamiliarity of a new culture, to the uncertainty of a new diagnosis, to the pain of death—all of these places of suffering and loss and toil—all of these places that we could call Galilee—Jesus is already there, and where he is, there is always the promise of life.

Galilee, after all, is the place where Jesus will meet us. So where is Galilee? It’s the

place where people dare to do crazy, unexpected things. Galilee is the place where enemies embrace, because Jesus meets them there. Galilee is the place where strangers are welcomed to the table, because Jesus is there as the host. Galilee is the place where good things happen—where grace is poured out; where neighbors love neighbors; where the hungry are fed; where the oppressed are set free—all because the Risen Lord has met us there. Galilee is the place where the Lord—the risen Lord—is made known, and where he has promised to meet us.

In his poem called *An Easter Proclamation*, J. Barrie Shepherd reminds us of what Easter does through the gift of love, and invites us to join in the song of hope that will resound forever in all the Galilees to which God's people go:

*“Fear no more, timid Christians.
 Fear no more! For he who went before us
 to the grave is now returned, with light
 and healing, grace, forgiveness on his wings;
 and bears to us that gift no other brings,
 the gift of love which never, ever ends,
 but sings its song of faith and hope,
 reunion, in the midst of all the broken,
 wounded, separated things of life;
 and makes them whole someday, and makes
 us whole somehow, and leads us
 ever forward
 in the ways of love whose Easter Alleluia
 rings through the gates of Hell
 and Heaven's bright eternity.”* (See reference info below.)

And now, may the God who has power over death Easter us in joy and in strength, that our witness to what God has done in Jesus Christ will abound in hope and overrun with joy.

And now, let us shout it together: Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Reference:

(J. Barrie Shepherd, “An Easter Proclamation,” in *The Presbyterian Outlook* (March 24-31, 1997), as quoted in an unpublished paper Beth Merrill Neel prepared for the 2006 gathering of Lectio Jubilate.)