A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

***Easter Sunday***

Mark 16:1-8

April 1, 2018

One of the things we’re taught pretty early on in church life is that every Sunday in the year is a little Easter. The low church folks remind us that every time Christians gather for worship we worship the resurrected Christ, no matter what the calendar says. Every Sunday is a kind of Easter, a celebration in faith, hope, and love of Christ who died and rose again for our salvation. We also learn, this time from the high church folks, that there’s more than just one Sunday actually called an Easter Sunday in the liturgical calendar. It turns out we have a whole season of them beginning today as the Easter season goes from now through another seven weeks of Sundays. We learn good church lessons from the low church and the high church. They agree that there’s more than one Sunday properly celebrating the resurrection of Christ and praying God would give us the grace and courage to live in the light of the resurrection.

But there’s something else . . . what we knew all along . . . there may be a liturgical season of seven Easter Sundays; there may be a theological claim that every Sunday is a resurrection Sunday, but there’s only One Easter. Only one day on which the fullness of the crucifixion drama is so richly entered and encountered, when the first rays of dawn’s light reveals a stone rolled away and a tomb mysteriously emptied of its resident. Only one day when children come dressed like “sugar confections.” (Thanks to Barbara Brown Taylor for that one). Only one day when Chrysostom is read aloud even in Baptist churches, when vigils are kept, fasts break, and otherwise rational people come to church in the dark cool morning to stand under a tree and sing the sun’s rise in the sky and the Son of God to arise from the grave.

It is the One Easter that gives life and meaning to all the other Easters in our lives. It is this day on which we gather in this sacred place to confess our faith and renew our hope in God for our lives and for this world God loved so powerfully. It would be a hollow democratization of all days to say that all days are the same. Many are the same, passing by like train cars lumbering down the tracks. But not this day. This is the day death took a body and came upon God, the day hell was embittered, Christ was risen, and all were summoned to enter into the joy of our Lord and receive the reward, rich and poor, ascetics and negligent, you that have fasted for Lent until the very last day and you that were already cheating by week one. Today the table is rich laden, the calf is fattened and no one goes hungry. That’s this day. Today of all days is, “The day the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

It is also, notes Barbara Brown Taylor, “the day of the annual Easter egg hunt, the day the cooks in the congregation keep looking at their watches. It is the day everyone is supposed to be happy, lovely, and well-fed, which is somewhat at odds with the gospel ” (BBT, “The Easter Sermon,” *Journal for Preachers*) She’s right you know.

Rejoicing, being glad in the day, are things we do not find in Mark’s Easter story in particular. The women in Mark’s gospel have the lead roles, but no lovely Easter hats. Not in this Easter story. Mark’s story is just so abrupt, so unrefined. Don’t tell your 10th grade grammar teacher, but Mark’s Easter story in the Greek ends in a preposition. It is also the Gospel’s last sentence, which means the whole book of Mark ends in a preposition, just dangling there, like a cursor blinking, waiting for the next word, a word which does not come, not from Mark’s pen anyway. Later on other folks added extra paragraphs you might see included in your Bible, but it’s been well-known since the early centuries that Mark ended in verse 8, with a grammatical gesture that something else is still coming.

It’s more than the preposition that’s challenging in Mark’s gospel. This isn’t grammar class. The whole story is at odds with pastel-hued celebrations. Three women who had stayed to the embittered end of Friday’s cross and burial go back to the tomb in the early morning of Sunday to anoint the body of their friend for a respectful burial. Not having solved the riddle of how the stone at the entrance to the tomb would be rolled away, they were amazed when they arrived to see it rolled away already. Bravely, they went inside. God bless these women, courageous and brave, a model for women who would follow in their footsteps until today. These three women duck in the carved out tomb and there see a young man, an angel we suppose, sitting there in the place where they expected to see the wrapped, lifeless body of Jesus, remaining in place where they had last seen him on Friday.

The young man speaks for God. Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him.

The women might be excused for muttering at the mansplaining, “Where they laid him? Who’s they? They all ran away.” You mean, “The place where we laid him.” But they didn’t press the point. The angel continued: “Go tell his disciples he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him.” The Gospel ends right here: “They went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Even their courage ran out. The gospel ends with the women violating both of the commands, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell.” They were afraid and they say nothing to anyone. Mark is even more decisive. Cover your ears grammarians, “They said nothing to nobody.”

That’s it. That’s what we get from Mark. No Matthew’s great commissioning, no John’s three times Peter is forgiven, no recognition in the garden with Mary Magdalene, no walk to Emmaus like in Luke. The other gospels resolve the mysterious story in all kinds of ways, but not Mark. In Mark it’s still dark. A new day is breaking, rays of light are about to come pouring over you, but the chill is still in the air, and so is fear. Mark leaves you right there with only the mysterious promise that the risen Christ may be found in Galilee.

For some people, that’s enough. It is the truest story they can hear right now and so Mark just may be their favorite Gospel Easter story. For some people, Easter can be just a little too much with its trumpeting assertions that death is defeated and God has decisively won victory over death, sin, grief, despair. That’s good news for sure but those monsters still feel all too real right now. A little good news of the most unlikely sort is welcome, but don’t frost the cake just yet. In addition, we live in a postmodern era now. It’s out of fashion to make bold declarations about anything having to do with mystery, faith, the unseen God, cosmic implications of the resurrection. We’re a little shy about that. We’re reluctant to do that. We’re a little afraid and, like the first tomb-visiting women, we often say nothing to nobody.

What’s a post-modern, cold, half-light of dawn, chilled church to do? Do as we’re told, I guess. Go to Galilee where we will see him, just as he told us. Galilee represents a lot more than a region north of Jerusalem in Mark’s gospel. It was the setting of the first half of the Gospel of Mark, where the majority of Jesus ministry happened, and now Galilee is symbolically the place where the risen Christ is found.

He hasn’t gone back to Galilee. It would be a mistake to think this means we go back in nostalgia to a simpler time. Mark’s gospel never looks back over its shoulder. It always looks forward. He has gone ahead to Galilee. The blinking curser at the end of the gospel is not a mistake. It’s the perfect ending, because it is an invitation from Mark to read the Gospel again from page one, reading it now with new eyes, enabled to see it is the Gospel of the risen Lord and his people in the world. Everywhere is Galilee, if you can hear it that way. Now the Gospel isn’t just a record of what Christ did. It is a revelation of what Christ does in the world now.

If you want to find the resurrected Jesus, he’s here.

This is Galilee, anywhere the sick are made well, evil spirits are cast away, outsiders are welcomed back in, the lame walk, sinners share Table, storms are stilled, hungry people are fed,

the gospel is proclaimed and disciples of Jesus stammer out the best confession of faith they know how, “You are the Christ.”

The place into which the risen Christ has gone is the place of human pain and need. That’s where the incarnate Christ went back then. That’s where the risen Christ is today.

We will find him, if we seek him with all our hearts, still ministering to human hearts with compassion.

On this Easter morning we look over the shoulders of the women as they peek in the tomb and with them we receive the command: do not be afraid. Tell the news. He is not dead in a tomb in the ground. He is not packed away in the tomb of history. The risen Christ is alive, is here, and always, always is going ahead of us into every place in need of redemption. There we will find him, and there he finds all people who need a savior this day and every day of our lives.

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