

## A Fearful Event – Brian Hartley

Mark 16:1-8

In the spring of 1985, I found myself spending a few days with one of my friends and mentors, Dr. Howard Snyder, during his days of pastoring at Chicago's Irving Park Free Methodist Church. I had just arrived in time for the evening house-meeting when one of the newest members stuck his head into the living room to signal that a couple of guys had broken out one of the church windows around the corner. Immediately, without thinking, several of us jumped to our feet and took off down the street in fervent pursuit of the alleged culprits. The heaviest of the two fell down and was cornd by one of our number while the other less-heavily-inebriated man continued on down the darkened street with me in hot pursuit. Despite my relative youth, I soon found myself falling further behind and, after several more blocks, I had soon lost him from sight.

It was only then, as I bent over to catch my breath and I struggled to make out the time on my watch that I realized that I was lost in an unfamiliar city past ten o'clock not having any idea whatsoever of my whereabouts. I thought I had a vague idea of the direction from which I had come but I had been zig-zagging for the past several blocks down narrow alleys and darkened streets. It was only then that I began to be afraid. Where was I? What if someone emerged from the shadows to confront me? Where would I go? What would I do?

My guess is that most of you have had a similar feeling of foreboding fear at some time in your life. It happens suddenly and without warning. Something happens and we act. And, before we know it, we are confronted with danger and possible harm. No matter how "macho" we are or think that we are, such moments can paralyze us. Whether we have been a victim of a crime or have lost control of our car on a patch of ice, we have little difficulty in recalling that feeling of panic and fear. And, that feeling is at the heart of today's gospel lesson.

This morning we gather to celebrate on what is the climax of the entire Christian year. It is a day filled with hope and with sunshine—a day when churches are decorated in festive flowers and children are bursting with energy (especially because of the overload of chocolate). For those of us who are getting up in years, we have heard and seen it all before. We know the story from beginning to end and have grown quite comfortable with it. In many respects, that story has been drained of its drama—its element of surprise. Like the worn-out terry-cloth robe that hangs at the back of my closet, we drag it out when appropriate and easily slip into its contours. It has become all-too-familiar.

And yet...it was a surprise—all of the Gospels agree upon this. This year's lectionary texts, predicated primarily upon St. Mark's gospel readings, have helped us trudge through the Jesus

story from beginning to end. For fifteen chapters, this narrative has read like a classic tragedy. Jesus has performed miracles, healed the sick, and raised the dead. And, over the course of the last few days we have walked with him as he has been betrayed, flogged, spat upon, and, finally, crucified like a common criminal. His death has been portrayed in horrific terms and we have recognized that we are in the land of a tragic story. This Jesus fits all of the rubrics that surround the great tragic hero—a good man of upstanding character who is undone by events beyond his own control.

But Mark's gospel does not end on this note. In a matter of just a few tacked-on sentences, the expected tragedy has been transformed into a comedic ending. Victory has been snatched from the jaws of death and the empty tomb has upset all previous categories. Like my students when we walk out of Donnell-Wiegand Funeral Home into the bright light of day, we give thanks that we have emerged from all of the gloom and doom of Holy Week and have, at long last, stumbled into the glories of Easter. But this is not what the earliest witnesses said. In fact, according to today's gospel, if we hurry too quickly towards the safe and the familiar we may be missing the true message of Easter.

This morning's text begins on a note of sadness juxtaposed with devotion. We have presented to us three devoted friends and followers of this Jesus—all of whom are women. Women, we must remember, were not allowed to stand as witnesses in a Jewish court. If there were two men and two hundred women who had all seen the same event, only the men's testimony would be allowed in as evidence. Here, then, we are allowed to catch a brief glimpse of the difference between the old covenant community of Israel and the new covenant community known as the church in these first witnesses to the most important event in the Christian faith. And they stand in stark contrast to their male counterparts

The male disciples have all scattered like the four winds. Even the leader, the outspoken and boisterous Peter, has denied his Lord. But, as the sun begins to peek over the horizon we see standing steadfastly these three faithful women. Early on a Sunday morning, the day after the Sabbath, they go to the tomb to anoint the body that would already be locked in rigor mortis. They would have come expecting the faint stench of decay to be leaking out. Their one desire would have been to quickly, but gently, anoint the body and to ensure it a proper burial. These three women were returning to the tomb out of sheer love and devotion. Their dedication to Jesus must have been what drove them to come back.

On the way, they remembered that the stone would have to be pulled out of its resting place and rolled back along the track to allow for their entrance. That stone would have been quite heavy and of a significant size—something beyond the strength of the three women. They must have been chastising themselves and one another for their forgetfulness and foolishness as they came within sight of the tomb. The length between the end of one sentence and the next is not great but it is within that space that the surprise occurs. It would be something like returning to the grave of a loved one and finding the grave dug up and the casket open. Although one might feel anger about the situation, the dominant emotion would be one of horror—of fear. I doubt

that anyone said much, once they perceived the situation. A thousand questions must have raced through their minds—Who did this? Where is the body? What is going on here?

Interestingly, the Evangelist doesn't pause here to analyze the state of their minds. The situation warrants action and the women immediately move towards and step into the tomb. The facts appear to be these: the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is now empty. There is no body to be seen. The gospel writer now juxtaposes astonishment next to their fear. Astonishment is the word used to describe the people's reaction to an event that is both miraculous and beyond comprehension. The Greek word, *ekstasis*, from which we get our word "ecstasy," means literally to be beside one's self. Mark leaves little doubt at this point that this event represents more than is observable to the naked eye.

The scene of the empty tomb means nothing by itself. Its meaning becomes available only to those who look on with eyes of faith. N. T. Wright suggests that, "faith of this sort is not blind belief, which rejects all history and science. Nor is it simply a belief that inhabits a totally different sphere...Rather, this kind of faith...is faith in the creator God, the God who promised to put all things to rights at the last, the God who raised Jesus from the dead within history, leaving evidence that demands an explanation from the scientist as well as anybody else," (Surprised by Hope, 71-72). This is a faith, Wright claims, that transcends but includes both history and science. By whatever words we describe such a faith, one thing is clear: **An empty tomb means nothing. A risen Lord means everything.**

All of the other gospel narratives begin to interject descriptive words at this point, but this first, and probably oldest, gospel is much more hesitant. The joy that is hinted at in many of the other accounts finds no place in Mark. One is left at the end with only these two words: fear and astonishment. This is where we began our thoughts this morning—with that all-too-familiar human emotion. When we are afraid, the doctors tell us, a chemical called adrenalin pumps into our body. It happened to me on that night now almost three decades ago in the city of Chicago and I experienced a profound heightening of the senses along with a renewed burst of energy. And so did these three women.

Our oldest manuscript evidence suggests that Mark's gospel comes to a crashing end at this point. Verses 9-20 are probably a later addition by an editor who wasn't convinced that the story should conclude on such a note. After all, who wants to have a story that ends with three women running in fear from the tomb. But it matches well with what we know of this short gospel which is the focus of this year's lectionary readings. Confusion and fear in Mark are the trademarks of Jesus' ministry. When Jesus raised Jairus' daughter from the dead, we are told that the people were astonished and afraid. When he healed and forgave the paralytic, we hear that the people were astonished. And, when Jesus commanded the forces of nature and walked on the water, the Evangelist says that the disciples experienced fear.

But, this is a fear that goes beyond that most basic of human emotions—one that is tied to a sense of reverence and awe. This is not simply the frenzy of emotional ecstasy, but that feeling

that comes to us on a very rare occasion, when we recognize that we are standing on holy ground and are in the very presence of God. It is not the fear of God provoked by lightning and thunder, by nature let loose. This is a much deeper fear in which the still, small voice of God elicits the raising of the hair on the back of our necks and one has the sense of an unknown and unspoken presence.

And from such terror and amazement spills out something even more important—hope. It is this hope which the apostle Paul claims becomes the very foundation stone of the gospel itself. And he is quick to point out that its origins are not to be found in his own ministry but in the very roots of the tradition of the church. And, as such, this is our story—a story of hope predicated on a worldview shift first witnessed to by those three faithful women at daybreak on that Sunday long ago. According to them, the world has shifted on its axis and the powers of this world have been forever displaced.

While the world has done what it normally does by prepackaging and commercializing the Easter message, we join those women from long ago this morning in that primitive experience of fear, reverence, and astonishment. And we go from this place to proclaim that which we have seen and heard. And exactly what is it that we can say at the end of the day? In response to that question, hear these words from Frederick Buechner in a sermon preached a half-century ago: “The sound of running feet. I cannot tell you anything more than this about what I think I would have seen if I had been there myself. No man can honestly. I do not believe that even the ones who actually were there could have told you more. . . . But I can tell you this: that what I believe happened and what in faith and with great joy I proclaim to you here is that he somehow got up, with life in him again, and the glory upon him. . . . He got up. He said, ‘Don’t be afraid.’ Rich man, poor man, child; sick man, dying; man who cannot believe, scared sick man, lost one. Young man with your life ahead of you. ‘Don’t be afraid,’” (The Magnificent Defeat, 80-81).

This, my friends, is the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Thanks be to God!