



The Gospel appointed for Year B of the three-year lectionary cycle is Mark, so the good news we are entrusted to proclaim this year at all three Easter liturgies (the Vigil, 8 a.m., and 10 a.m.) is Mark's version of the Easter story: Mark 16:1-8, to be precise. We pick up where we left off on Palm/Passion Sunday when Joseph of Arimathea laid the body of Jesus in a tomb that had been hewn out of the rock and then rolled a stone against the door of the tomb: Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Joseph saw where the Body was laid.

The Sabbath is now over and Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome are all on their way to the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for burial. When they arrive, however, they discover that the tomb is empty. Mark ends the story ironically. Throughout the entire Gospel Jesus has been telling people who recognize him as the Christ "not to tell anyone until after he has been crucified and raised." Yet they can't keep silent. Now it is finally time for these first witnesses to "go and tell" but they remain silent, "for they were afraid."

I could easily preach one long sermon at all three liturgies. But doing so has two disadvantages. First, the Easter liturgies and music are all rich enough in their own right that a lengthy sermon really isn't necessary. (I may change my mind next year so don't hold me to that!) Allowing the exploration of the story to unfold more slowly, in three parts, seemed to make sense to me this year. The challenge in doing it this way, however, is in knowing that most persons will hear only 1/3 of this extended telling of the story, or maybe 2/3 if they come to the Vigil and again on Easter morning. It is vital, therefore, to allow each part to stand alone. Those who are interested can go back and chat with friends who attended different liturgies this Easter weekend or they can read this manuscript to find out the 2/3 that they missed!

A second, more pastoral, reason for telling the story in this fashion is that Holy Week is a marathon not only for clergy but for the music ministry as well, and particularly for the minister of music and the choir. Usually by the third time around on Easter Day I could call on virtually any choir member and have them preach the sermon for me. So this year I decided to try to keep them on their toes by throwing them a curve ball (or at least try to keep them awake!) This Easter I'm preaching to the choir.

In a sense, this metaphor is an apt one for our time. Whether or not we are literally members of the choir, it is increasingly the case that there are fewer and fewer “C&E” (Christmas and Easter) Christians who show up for worship twice a year. Or I should say this: if they are out there then they must be going someplace other than St. Francis Church for Christmas and Easter.

Even when I went to seminary twenty years ago there was talk about trying to preach Christmas and Easter sermons that might “reach the un-churched” (or the mal-churched.) But more and more my experience of our cultural context is that there is very little social pressure left in our culture for people to “show up” on Christmas and Easter if church attendance isn’t already a part of their lives. Our attendance at St. Francis does spike on both days, to be sure; but that reality is almost totally explained by the fact that the “usual suspects” who may normally attend worship two or three times a month are all here on those days, often with some visiting family members who have their own parishes back home. I see very few unfamiliar faces.

Whether this is good or bad I am not sure, but what it suggests to me is that the preacher is free to focus on trying to more faithfully form disciples of those who are already professed believers. Easter is not so much about reaching out to potential newcomers and trying to encourage (or shame) them into coming back for the remaining 49 days of Easter (if it ever was that.) Obviously as followers of Jesus who are called to practice hospitality to all who come through our doors we should be welcoming and hospitable to any seeker who finds us on Easter morning. But in this first decade of the twenty-first century I have come to think that Easter preaching is more and more like preaching on the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost: it’s about preaching to the choir.

Or more precisely, it is about preaching to the Baptized community. It is about remembering the story together that we have already professed in our Baptism and in confirming our Baptism as we seek to grow into the full stature of Christ, always with God’s help. It’s like any other week only more so, because Easter goes to the very heart of our identity as Baptized persons. We are called to be an Easter people, which is simply to say that as the journey continues to unfold – both for us as individuals and for us as a faith community, we are being formed more and more into Christ’s likeness. We who have died with him are also raised with him to new life.

This Easter story, told in three parts, is offered therefore to the choir of the saints – and we are all part of that choir that dares to make our song even at the grave: alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!

When the Sabbath was over,
Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome
bought spices,
so that they might go and anoint Jesus.

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.

Part I: Matters of Death and Life (The Easter Vigil)

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint Jesus.

It still takes my breath away: Mark's telling of the Easter story especially. We all know how the story ends, right? We know because we are the Baptized community – because we are gathered here as people who proclaim week in and week out the Paschal mystery:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

But those women coming to the tomb early that morning didn't know that yet. They only knew the first part: that Christ had died. They'd seen it happen; seen his body laid into the tomb. So they came expecting to find a corpse.

That's why they go out to buy spices. We're not talking here about rosemary and thyme for the Easter lamb! They are going to prepare Jesus' body for burial; the spices Mark is talking about are ones like the frankincense and myrrh that Jesus got from the wise guys at his birth or like the costly perfume made of pure nard that Mary used to anoint Jesus' feet in Bethany just before his death. I'm sorry to be this direct but the spices we are talking about here are the first-century equivalent of embalming fluid. These women are coming in grief and sadness to do the difficult work of preparing a body for burial.

We may know the Easter story well, but if we rush too quickly past Good Friday to the empty tomb then we miss the opportunity to put ourselves in their shoes during that moment of discovery. We can do that if we simply slow down a little bit – because surely we are well acquainted with grief. As a fellow traveler and pastor of this congregation I feel the pain that this past year has brought with it. It's been a long winter, and while signs of spring surround us, so too do lingering reminders of the ice storm that disrupted our lives only a few months ago. Some of us are grieving the loss of jobs in this frightening economy, or frightened that things may still get worse before they get better. Economic stress puts strains on marriages and family life. An unusually large number of parishioners this past Lent have been dealing with loss and have buried parents and grandparents.

So we know all too well about death and fear and loss. And if we can tap into those feelings it isn't very hard to imagine how those women must have been feeling when they went out to buy their spices in order to prepare their friend's body for burial.

Sometimes people say to me that it must be hard to do the work I do: anointing the dying or trying to speak words of hope at a funeral. But it really isn't the hardest part of my job – not by a long shot. It's not necessarily easy, but it is real and in truth it is the

work I love the most. Sometimes it's emotionally charged and sometimes there is a lot to sort through with families: unresolved conflicts or unfinished business and all the rest. But I really do believe that in every ending there truly is a new beginning.

And that is what this holy night is about. In the midst of death we discover new life, and the living Christ who is calling us to journey to a new place. That journey requires risk and courage and determination if we mean to become an Easter people ourselves. But above all, it requires hope. It is into *this* moment – into the context of our real lives on this April night with the mixture of joys and concerns that mark our lives – that Mark's Gospel breaks in to offer us a word of good news.

Those woman really are surprised by joy: they weren't looking for resurrection that morning and I think that's important. God broke into their lives where they least expected it. I sometimes think our Enlightenment sensibilities get it completely backwards. We have been taught that "seeing is believing." But sometimes I think we need to believe (or at least be open to belief) in order to see.

Those women were just taking care of business. They were doing the work that needed to be done. They were trying to be faithful to a friend. I see people like that every day: people in this congregation who drive a friend for their chemotherapy and sit with them. Or people who make a casserole for a neighbor whose father just died. It's no big deal and the truth is, it is no big deal. It's just what people do. Only in a hectic world lots of people don't have the time or energy or inclination to do it so it actually becomes something of a big deal. In and of themselves, such random acts of kindness are beautiful and kind and loving. We can't always fix things or make them better but we can be present to one another.

Yet it is in the midst of such ordinary moments that sometimes much more than that happens. Easter happens. Sometimes out of such moments we discover new life and that new life begins to take hold in us. It changes us. It changes the way we see the world, the way we live in relationship to God and neighbor. Maybe at first it's only like a tiny little mustard seed. And maybe at first it's kind of scary for us, as it was for those women. But it's a beginning. Easter extends and is nurtured, I think, when we begin to reach out beyond our own small circle of family and friends to strangers – in whom we seek the face of the risen Christ.

I think of the second Wednesday of every month. The countertops here fill up with food and a group comes into the kitchen. Often they are here already at work when I show up at the office. It's not glamorous: opening up these large Sam's Club cans of beans and cutting semi-frozen hot dogs and putting the whole shebang into the oven to cook all day. Another group shows up in the late afternoon and hauls it into Worcester and scoops it out onto plates. It's all so mundane. It's no big deal. Hungry people getting a plate of hot food.

Or I think of those who give of their own time and resources and use up vacation time to travel to El Salvador to accompany the Church there, to stand in solidarity with God's people there as strangers become friends. It's no big deal because ministry like that doesn't feel like work; it feels like a blessing. That is how Easter happens—in the midst of those moments when we can see beyond ourselves to the needs of someone else. We are going about our business and everything is changed. Everything is made new again.

I love this liturgy – this ancient practice of gathering in the dark and lighting our candles of hope. Christ has died, and death is something we know all too well. But we gather here tonight to remember that Christ is risen; that Christ has been victorious over death. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Alleluia!

Part II: He Has Gone Ahead of You (Easter Morning – 8 a.m.)

...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.

I just love Anne Lamott's *Traveling Mercies*, a humorous and honest account of one woman's journey to faith. Partly I love her for her irreverence which I find to be, paradoxically, profoundly reverent. I need to think about faith in real ways rather than pious platitudes and she is real. I just love the way she begins, maybe in part because it affirms my own journey. She writes:

My coming to faith didn't start with a leap but rather a series of staggers from what seemed like one safe place to another...I can see how flimsy and indirect a path they made. Yet each step brought me closer to the verdant pad of faith on which I somehow stay afloat today.

Matthew and Luke and John each give us a give us a slew of post-Easter appearances in their gospels. We'll hear some of them during the Fifty Days of Easter. In Matthew's gospel, shortly after the disciples are told to return to Galilee, they meet Jesus himself. He reiterates the request delivered by an angel of the Lord that we heard today: go home! When they do get back to Galilee, they are given the Great Commission: to "go and make disciples to the ends of the earth."

In Luke we get those people on the road to Emmaus, where a stranger meets them and they don't know who he is until he takes the bread and blesses and breaks and gives it—and their eyes are opened. In the taking and the blessing and the breaking and the giving, Jesus is made known to them. Not too long after that he shows up for broiled fish to tell them they must now be witnesses. It seems to suggest to me that Christ is made known not only at the Eucharistic table but at our supper tables as well as we

share fish or ham or lamb or tofu with those we love, and even those who sometimes drive us nuts. Luke writes an entire sequel – the Acts of the Apostles – to try to get at what it looks like to bear witness to the resurrection around the Mediterranean in places as far off as Corinth and Galatia and Rome.

In John's Gospel, we get Jesus breathing the Holy Spirit into the disciples more immediately: no need to wait fifty days until Pentecost. That Spirit heals and empowers the disciples and gives them the authority to forgive sins. Thomas the Twin isn't there, so we get that great story next weekend about trust and the desire to "see for ourselves." And then in John another story about broiled fish and a command to Peter to show his love by tending the sheep and feeding the lambs.

Compared to the other three gospels, Mark's ending seems abrupt and maybe even a little bit disappointing. Is that really all there is after forty days of Lent – and what felt to me like six long months of winter? Keep on keeping on, go home to Galilee and keep your eyes open? No wonder the women were too afraid to tell anyone! What kind of a message is that! They don't even get to see the risen Christ himself – only a witness who tells them that he has been raised and that they, in turn, must tell the disciples that they can all go home and get back to their lives. *He is going ahead of you to Galilee, as he promised; there you will see him, just as he promised.*

So did Jesus in fact go ahead of them to Galilee? What happened when they got there? Mark doesn't tell us. And in not telling us – in his restraint – I find good news.

I grew up in the church singing "What a friend we have in Jesus." Like those women coming to the empty tomb on Easter morning I heard and saw a wise and compassionate teacher, and healer, and friend. And like those women I believe that when Jesus dies on Friday he dies as we all will die. It doesn't seem to me that one needs to make any special claims about who Jesus is to see in him a wise teacher or to see in him a role model for how to live life to its fullest. In his dying as in any faithful death we can find inspiration and hope and courage.

But the journey of faith really begins here, on Easter morning – not only for those women but for you and me as well. As we leave and are sent into the world – back home and back to school and back to work, do we go remembering that a good man died too young or do we go expecting to find that the risen Christ has gone ahead of us, as he promised, and that we will see him?

For me the answer is sometimes, yes, and sometimes, "Lord, help my unbelief." Sometimes when I stand before you as a priest and I take and bless and break and give the bread my eyes are opened and it is so clear. I behold the Body of Christ – not just an historical remembrance but as a mystical presence – as a Real Presence among and through and with us here and now. And sometimes something very close to that happens at my own dinner table as well over fish or ham or lamb (never tofu) when I

am so overcome by the blessings of my life and the gift of loving and being loved that it takes my breath away.

But just as often (and maybe even more often) it feels like one step up and two steps back. Not a leap of faith but a series of staggers, something like what Anne Lamott speaks so honestly about.

But what I have come to believe is that Christ is there, too; whether I know it at the time or not. In fact Easter isn't all Emmaus Road experiences and fish breakfasts by the Sea or chatting with the gardener. Those moments do come by God's grace but more often I cannot see Christ *in the moment*. In fact, very often it is only in taking time to pause and to reflect and look back on where I have traveled that I see the hand of God at work in my life. And I bet it is (at least some of the time) that way for some of you as well.

You can't *prove* resurrection: not to yourself and not to others. It isn't like that. The evidence can only take you so far. That doesn't mean that there isn't credible evidence in our lives and in our world. But here is the thing: the evidence is not to be found in that empty tomb. Not by those women and not by us. There is nothing to see there. The evidence we get is discovered when we go back home. Believing is seeing, and when our vision is changed, the evidence for faith is found all around us.

Christ is alive! That is the song we sing not just today, and not only for the next fifty days – but a song that resonates through our lives. As we sing our alleluias, Christ continues to work in and through us until we ourselves become walking evidence of Easter and credible witnesses to the resurrection.

Part III: Scared Silent (Easter Morning - 10 a.m.)

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.

Mark's gospel was written almost forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, almost certainly the first of the four gospels to be written down. There is broad consensus from the oldest manuscripts that Mark's gospel ends just as we heard it today, with these words: "...for they were afraid." Actually the Greek is a bit more awkward than that. It's as if Mark stammers to his ending something like this:

"...and going out they fled from the tomb, for fear and trembling had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone. They were afraid, because..."

The scholars will tell you that Luke is the educated evangelist with the best Greek, and that Mark is at best a C student compared to Luke. But I give Mark an A+ for the ending. Throughout Mark's gospel, every time someone has recognized Jesus as the

Christ, he tells them they must not tell anyone until *after* the resurrection. And of course they ignore him; so every time he heals someone they promptly go out to tell everyone they know.

On this day, however, when they are not only *allowed* to speak but told that their marching orders are to “go and tell” – they say nothing to anyone. The moment has finally come to speak, and yet they are scared silent.

Now if this is how a film ended you could be certain that a sequel was already in the works. It’s really no way to end a story *unless* there is much more to tell. And I think this is precisely the point. Mark leaves us hanging. He leaves us on the edge of our seats, asking: what happened next? *When* did they find their voices and speak and *how* did they overcome their fears?

Of course this isn’t the end of the story and from the first hearers of this story to this very gathering on this very day we know that. We are in on the joke. Because if they stood there and never found their voices then the story ends right there. A good man was killed by the authorities for daring to speak do justice and love kindness and walk humbly with God. Details at 11. It happens every day. As Billy Joel can tell you, the good die young; and the list of martyrs is a long one.

But the point of this day is that Jesus isn’t in that tomb; He who was crucified has been raised. He’s alive! Go and tell somebody! Easter isn’t *proven* by finding a shroud with DNA evidence on it. Easter is told and experienced. Now if those women stayed silent, then the events we remembered this past week are just a terrible tragedy. But we gather here to proclaim the mystery of faith:

Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.

We gather here to break the bread and share the wine because we dare to insist that the story isn’t finished yet, and the sequel is still being written. Our presence here is evidence that those women found their voices. That is to say that they overcame their fear. We don’t know how long it took them but they found their voices again, and they went and told the disciples and the disciples founded churches around the Mediterranean and told others who told others who told others.

Somebody told John Chrysostom way back in the latter years of the fourth century. He was a gifted preacher who told many others. As far as I’m concerned he pretty much sums it up when he said on an Easter morning only about fifteen hundred years ago:

Come you all: enter into the joy of your Lord. You the first and you the last, receive alike your reward; you rich and poor, dance together; you sober and you weaklings, celebrate the day; you who have kept the fast and you who have not, rejoice today. The table is richly loaded: enjoy its royal banquet. The calf is the fatted one: let no one go away

hungry. All of you enjoy the banquet of faith; all of you receive the riches of God's goodness.

Somebody told Mrs. Bates and the Rev. Gail Wintermute in the early part of the twentieth century and as my Sunday school teacher and pastor at the Hawley Methodist Church when I was growing up, they told me. They didn't simply sit me down and say, "now this is what happened, Richie." They showed up and taught church school and led worship and tried to live their lives in congruence with the faith they proclaimed. They tried to live with courage and hope and point beyond themselves to a power greater than they.

This is how it works. Somebody told my grandparents who told my parents who told me. And somebody told Sue Bastardo and Jill Williams. Somebody told somebody who told you. And here we are – at various stages of the journey, some of us at a place where we know that Easter is the most real thing there is – far more real than a number that measures stock values on Wall Street. And others of us are scared – maybe even scared silent right now – maybe even paralyzed by our fear. If so, then we are in good company because those women knew what it was like to be afraid long before us.

I can't know how or when those women found their voices but I can take a pretty good guess after twenty years or so of ordained ministry. They went back and found the disciples. They talked it over, did some theological reflection perhaps. They took the bread and broke it and shared it and they remembered. They cooked up some food and shared it with the poor. They tried to show kindness and hospitality to the stranger, even the Roman imperialists. And over time they began not only to see the world in a new way and to let go of their fear; but eventually they even found their voices again.

Now all of this may not be enough for Christopher Hitchens or Bill Maher. But the genius of Mark's ending, as I read it, is that Mark means for us to see that *we* are the sequel. Christ is always going ahead of us, always preparing a way before us. The ancient Celtic wisdom insisted that the risen Christ is with us, within us, behind us, before us, beside us, beneath us, above us, in quiet, in danger, in hearts of all – both friend and stranger. The world is Easter-ed in and through ordinary people like you and me as we proclaim with our lives – sometimes with words – that Christ is alive.

I think Mark means for us to insert our own ending...or rather to provide our own "updates." We need to bear witness in a world bent on war that there is a Prince of Peace who shows us another path, a path that leads to full and abundant life for all the peoples of this earth. When we do, Easter happens.

Will we "consider the lilies of the field" and store up treasures in heaven now that our treasures on earth have taken such a relentless beating in the stock market? Will we dare to be faithful stewards in a world consumed by fear – or will fear consume us like moths and rust? When we do, Easter happens.

We live in a nation that is perhaps more deeply divided than at any since the Civil War and the talking heads are saying that the culture wars are about to get “revved up” again. (I hadn’t noticed that they ever stopped!) Will we respond as agents of healing and reconciliation, insistent on looking for the common ground that helps us to become “one nation” again? When we do, Easter happens.

I guarantee you won’t find the answers to these kinds of questions in the self-help section of the bookstore! But when it happens, it happens in communities like this one, where people are learning to put their trust not in ideology, but in God alone – learning to live against the grain – learning how to love one another.

Easter happens where bread is broken and wine is poured and music is shared and a sustaining Word is offered – because in and through these ordinary actions – the Risen Christ is made manifest. The Table is set and all are welcome: all are invited to enjoy this banquet of faith and to receive the riches of God’s goodness, for this is the feast – the victory of our Lord! And the Lord is risen indeed!

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