

Gospel Reading: Mark 16:1-8

word count 1,925

Today’s gospel account of the events of Easter Sunday is the one most accessible to Progressive Christians. We say, “Oh good. Here is simple and sensible Mark. His gospel doesn’t give us legions of angels hovering over shepherds at the beginning, and enormous claims at the end. His story begins with Jesus coming to Galilee to be baptized and begin his ministry, and ends with an empty tomb.”

In Mark’s telling, the three women, Mary Magdalene, Mary mother of James, and therefore of Jesus, and Salome all come down to the tomb to find the stone rolled away. They find not a body, but a young man dressed in white in the tomb.

Not to be outdone, the subsequent gospel writers carry it further. In Luke, there were two men in dazzling raiment. In Matthew, it was an angel of the Lord. Later, the community of John would record that there were two angels in the tomb, and that they did not appear to Peter and John, but only to Mary Magdalene. The “facts” of the story change according to the teller.

Each gospel account needs to tell us more than just an account of an empty tomb. Even the bare-facts gospel of Mark is affected. Within two centuries of its writing, a shorter ending and a longer ending will be added after the final eighth verse in order to bring a greater emphasis on resurrection and salvation in “Mark’s hand,” yet clearly without his knowledge.

How do we “factual fundamentalists” hear the Easter message? For, we *are* factual fundamentalists. All that we moderns call, “truth” has been reduced to its factual provability. Statistics have become our truth, the verifiable black-and-white stands as the final word.

There is this layer of frozen thinking has settled across us moderns, removing our ability to see truth in the places where it dwells, where those before us could so easily find it—in parable and story, in poetic image and metaphor, even in shades of gray. Truth is all around us.

To require that “truth” be put to a test in order to be proven as a statistic denies what is wonderful about it—that is, how truth can cross borders of understanding, how it can be worn and “felt true,” and how free of our need to confine it, it really is. Because we have tightened the definition of “truth” to mean, “fact,” we are left struggling with texts that were written with poetry, parable and metaphor in mind. We are left trying to apply the standards of another age into thinking that only accepts what can be enclosed in a provable hypothesis.

Our thinking dictates that we profess a belief that is based on something that is literally true, rather than believing in a truth that leads us to understanding our place in our own evolving story of our relationship to the Cosmos and a Creative energy that brought it into being.

For some Christians, this means holding a selectively literal understanding of the Bible, while professing against their own common sense and scientific evidence, that they believe every word to be literally true. For these Christians, belief is a noun—it is something you profess for your own personal salvation.

For more progressive Christians, it often means throwing the story out because it does not match up to our standard for “truth.” This does a disservice to our central faith story. We believe as a verb—our believing is an ongoing action of taking up the ways of the Jesus who came to be baptized in Galilee, where he laid out a vision for the kingdom of God and asked those who would follow him to work for that idea of a servant-led, anti-imperialist movement where all were included equitably and fairly. This is how we understand a God we name, “Love.”

Yet, no matter where our theological center rests, we treat one of our central faith stories, as the old Buddhist saying goes, “Like a finger pointing at the moon. We are too busy examining the finger to realize that the truth exists in what the finger is pointing *to* in the distance.

The Easter story is central to our understanding of Jesus. Writing in their book, ‘The Last Week,’ Borg and Crossan agree: “Without Easter, we wouldn’t know about Jesus. If his story had ended with his crucifixion, he most likely would have been forgotten—another Jew crucified by the Roman Empire in a bloody century that witnessed thousands of such executions. Perhaps a trace or two about him would have shown up in Josephus or in Jewish rabbinic sources, but that would have been all. Indeed, without Easter, we wouldn’t even have ‘Good Friday,’ for there would have been no abiding community to remember and give meaning to his death.”¹

The events of Easter morning are told and retold in each gospel. Mary Magdalene, Peter and John racing, Mary, Salome and Mary with oils for anointing—all find the stone rolled away. They twittered the news across tombs, roads and into the city, to disciples and passersby alike. It all happens so fast—there is a breathlessness to the news. Jesus is not there.

“He is going ahead of you to Galilee,” says the mysterious young man in white, sitting in the tomb. As some scholars have suggested, “go to Galilee,” means, “Go back to where the story began, to the beginning of the Gospel.” When you do that, what you find is the call to “prepare the way,” and that “the kingdom of God is at hand.” So, the last words of this original ending of Mark are about following the way, and in so doing, working to bring about the kingdom of God.
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And what is “The Way”? It is the walk Jesus walked—the walk he asks you to walk as well for the sake of all, as well as for your own. It is a costly and difficult path. And what is “The kingdom of God at hand”? It is the here and now, where we are the voices and hands of Christ on earth, working with God to create in love a welcome place for all of Creation before our selfishness and destructive powers undo us. Love God and your neighbor as yourself. So simple.

The message of Easter morning, of the empty tomb, might be stated like this this: You cannot kill love. There is an unending supply that comes from a source beyond our measure or knowledge. It is simply there, the great, “I am.” Love will rise again.

You cannot kill love. Any structure that exists the purpose of which is to enrich the few and impoverish the many, will be swept away by the victory of God-in-love. Any ideology or religious institution that seeks to exclude, marginalize, or ally itself with a domination system will eventually perish in the face of love and truth. Darfur and Iraq. Terrorism and religious extremism of any kind. Poverty and homelessness. War and the prevaricating leaders that bring us to it. Sexism, racism, homophobia. Keep tipping over tables. Love will rise again.

You cannot kill love. We can say hurtful things to those nearest and dearest to us. We can drive them away, end a marriage, shun a friend, make ourselves feel in our deepest places that we are vacant vessels, a void; an empty tomb. However, this story that we gather to hear is that there is always the opportunity reaching out to us for a resurrection moment—we can be filled again. Isn’t that *one* of the reasons we still fill our churches on Easter morning? To know that however miserable we make ourselves, there is still a chance that love will rise again?

You cannot kill love. We might lose the one we love most, we might lose ourselves in our own grief and wonder if this is it for us—is it over? Are our best times behind us? We need hope, we need help, we need to be in community where someone near to us can say the word that begins to lift us out of our empty places. Accept it when it comes! Maybe this is why some of

us come here today—to know that no matter how lonely are the places in which we dwell, love will rise again.

Maybe this is a truth, unverifiable, un-fact-checkable, about Easter morning. We need to know that you cannot kill love. We might descend into the darkest of places—lose our jobs, lose our sobriety, give in to addictions, lose control of our lives, and even lose our sense of identity so that we feel unlovable even unto our own selves. We come to hear the word of truth in our collective faith story—we come for help, we come to know that somehow through some positive action or step to care for our wounded selves, we can cast aside the grave-clothes and step out again. Love will rise again.

You cannot kill love. Ken Starr himself can argue love's guilt before Pontius Pilates in black robes. Pilate may wash his hands and turn it back to the angry mobs, where love will be battered. The faces made ugly by ignorance and fear can shout, “Yes on H8,” and carry love off to be crucified. But for love, genuine love that comes from the ground of all being, Resurrection Sunday always follows Good Friday, and so I tell you, they cannot kill love. Love will rise again.

You cannot kill love. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were scared. He said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is not here.” Go, tell his disciples, tell Peter, tell each other...to turn back to the beginning of the story and look at it again. There he will be in Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.”

And when you do that, what you will read is the call to “prepare the way,” and that “the kingdom of God is at hand.” Therefore, these last words of this original ending of Mark become about preparing and following the way, so now it is in your hands—the work of bringing about this thing Jesus calls, “The kingdom of God.”

The stone is rolled away and love is risen—despite all attempts to keep love in the grave, it can't be contained. That's an Easter message I need to hear, and one I hope you can appreciate as well, living as we do in a Good Friday world.

What remains of our brokenness that can be healed, what is there in our fractured friendships and relationships that we can begin to put right, what forgiveness can we both offer and accept, what help can we give or receive, and what can we begin to do to put our world right, hands of Christ in the world that we are?

We need the Easter story. Let's reclaim it in a way that is true for us—we can leave the empty tomb without fear, and meet Jesus back in Galilee again to begin to prepare and follow the way. You cannot kill love. Help me now to close with a call and response:

Love is risen. *It is risen indeed.*
Love is risen. *It is risen indeed.*
Love is risen. *It is risen indeed.*

Hymn # 4 “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You”

Sermon Resources:

1. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, “The Last Week” (Harper-Collins, New York) 2006 p. 190. In general, this is a good chapter on Easter Sunday.
2. Ibid. p. 198 (I am paraphrasing and idea represented here at the top of the page.)

Scripture for Sunday, April 12, 2009

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. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 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. 7 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.” 8 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.

