

Darkness Breaks Slowly

A sermon on Mark 16:1-8 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 March 2024

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Message

The good news of resurrection meets us in the darkest places of our lives and so is initially incomprehensible and disorienting.

Sermon

One of the considerations as we were rethinking the start time of this service for this year was darkness.

The Paschal Vigil traditionally starts in the darkness, and it is not just because it traditionally starts around a bonfire, and bonfires are much more spectacular in the darkness. The Paschal Vigil traditionally starts in the darkness also because the Paschal message, the message of the resurrection starts in darkness. The gospel accounts all agree that the resurrection happened in the dark of night, but there is more to it than that. The resurrection meets us in the darkest places of our lives.

Yesterday I had a long pastoral conversation on the phone with a woman who had read some of my sermons online and thought I might be able to help her make some sense of what was going on in her life and where God was in the midst of it all. She was in a pretty dark place. Her marriage of nearly 40 years had come to a sudden end when her evangelist husband announced that God had told him to leave her and move in with another woman. That was devastating enough, but he'd also left her with a multi-million dollar loan that he'd taken out in her name.

She was calling me because she'd read in one of my sermons that I'd had a major faith crisis when my first marriage ended, because I had believed that if I was doing the right thing, to the best of my ability, God would make sure the marriage would work out. My caller yesterday had believed the same thing, and was still in shock that it could have ended like this.

What does the Paschal story of resurrection have to say to her in the face of such catastrophe and devastation?

It seemed very appropriate to be grappling with that question on Good Friday. It was, of course, easier to make connections between her experience and feelings and the devastating catastrophe of a gruesomely executed messiah. But today I have to ask myself the next question. What does the resurrection story have to say here?

And of course, yesterday's caller is far from alone in crying out in confusion and bewilderment, unable to make sense of the gospel's promise of new life and hope when the whole world seems to be turning to shit. How do any of us manage to celebrate the triumph of life in the face of the Hamas atrocities in Israel, and the tens of thousands of civilian deaths in Gaza? How do we celebrate the resurrection of life and hope in the face of the ISIS attack in Moscow, or the Russian attacks on Ukraine? What do we celebrate while caring for loved ones slowing dying with dementia?

And are any of us entirely ready to emerge from the global trauma of the pandemic? As a society, it seems that there is still a kind of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder messing with our minds. Have we even managed to grieve all that properly, or is our collective grieving process still stuck somewhere in the denial phase?

Now, there is always a big danger here for Christians as we celebrate the resurrection. Many of us like to skip over the crucifixion stories quite quickly and get straight on to singing and dancing and shouting our Easter Alleluias. But as any good psychologist can tell you, rushing to whack a happy face on everything is a classic form of denial when faced with trauma and grief that feel overwhelming and threatening. Let's pretend it is all over and everything is good again. Maybe we Christians are in danger of reinforcing that kind of smiley faced denial and delusion. If we are, then our celebrations are not healthy or godly.

As you probably noticed, the version of the resurrection story we heard tonight from Mark's gospel doesn't really buy into that rush to superficial happiness. In fact, it ends on a very different note:

The women bolted out of the tomb and fled as fast as they could, shaking with fear and their heads spinning. They were so frightened that they didn't breathe a word of it to anyone.

Now if you look in your Bibles, you might think that that's because we stopped too soon. There's more to come. But look again. In almost all Bibles, the sections that come after verse 8, where we stopped, will have headings that say something like "An Alternative Ending." That's because those later bits are so obviously not written by the same author that pretty much every biblical scholar agrees that the original version of Mark's gospel ended where we ended our reading tonight. "They were so frightened that they didn't breathe a word of it to anyone."

In fact, it is probably fair to say that the alternative endings are an example of that desperation for something happy to mask the pain and confusion. Perhaps they were tacked on by people who couldn't cope with their own grief and devastation, and were rushing to paste smiley faces over it all.

Here's the thing. When we are in the darkest and most painful places in our lives, the sudden arrival of unexpected good news does not immediately transport us smoothly out of our pain and into joy and delight. When we are in the darkest and most painful places in our lives, the sudden arrival of unexpected good news is jarring and disorienting. It may even feel like it has risen up to mock us. Our broken hearts and bruised minds do not know what to do with this sudden news. They cannot process it, or even comprehend what it is.

In real life we cannot do the emotional journey from Good Friday to Resurrection Sunday morning in a matter of hours. In real life, our experience is nearly always much more like the experience of these women at the original end of Mark's gospel. They hear the message from the anonymous messenger in the tomb saying that Jesus has broken free from the grip of death, but that message makes no sense to them in that moment. With them, we might sense in some deep recess of our hearts that this message is the most important news we have ever heard, but in that moment it can't break through the fog of pain and devastation that has wrapped itself so tightly around us in these days.

We bolt out of the tomb and flee as fast as we can, shaking with fear and our heads spinning, so frightened that we don't breathe a word of it to anyone.

Maybe in these days, in this world we live in, this unfinished ending of Mark's gospel is the resurrection story we need. Maybe we too need time to grapple with the terror and the amazement that must crash over us when God's incomprehensible work of resurrection collides in real time with the broken and catastrophic mess of our lives. Maybe we don't need to shout Alleluia right away. Maybe it's okay to whisper and sit in gob-smacked silence.

This year especially, don't let anyone rush you into smiley faced joy. Our world has been and is in the midst of some unimaginable traumas. We are still trembling and fighting the urge to just flee into false smiles and deluded denials. Don't be afraid to sit in the darkness of that. Because it is in the darkness of all that that something truly extraordinary happens. It is in the darkness of all that that God breaks open the tomb of the world and holds out wounded hands in love, beckoning us to follow into resurrection life.

God knows and understands that we can't process that in a moment, or even in a few hours. This gospel says that's okay. Resurrection doesn't depend on our comprehension or our readiness. The resurrection of Jesus has happened, and in that, the resurrection of the whole world has begun. And it will be ready to gather us up when we eventually get over the shock and bewilderment and the Alleluia's begin to burst from our lips from a place of truth and wonder and love. Don't be afraid to wait in the darkness until it happens.

Jesus will meet you there.