

The Promises God Kept in Jesus Christ: The Promise of Death's Defeat
Isaiah 25:6-9
Mark 16:1-8

“And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever.”

I think it not by chance that, in the season of Advent, the darkness seems to deepen all around us as we await the humanly inconceivable news of God's Word become flesh; likewise, in the season of Lent, death appears all the more victorious in headlines and the human heart as we await the humanly incomprehensible news of death's defeat. That news is announced this morning by a young man dressed in white who says to three alarmed women, “Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised. He is not here.” What does it mean and what does it matter that, in the face of death's overwhelming dominion--on the side of a French mountain or in the dorm rooms of Christians in Kenya or among Palestine refugees suddenly surrounded by ISIS on the outskirts of Damascus or down the Avenue overrun with drugs and gun violence or at the bedside of a dear one about to breathe his last—what does it mean or matter that Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, has been raised? How could it possibly be that, in the death of a first century Jew, God's promise to swallow up death forever has been kept and changes everything?

The question that has harried the only creatures created by God to anticipate our own death, the question that pursues even smart, post-Enlightenment people like us, is the question of our final destination: *are we creatures determined by death for the grave or are we creatures destined in love for God?* The strange ending of Mark's Gospel would seem to keep the question of our destiny in play. In response to the young man's words, the women bolt and run, saying nothing to anyone. Some in this crowd may be compelled to do the same at the end of the hour. What are we to make of the freedom Mark gives us, in the end, to walk away from this story?

According to story-teller Marilynne Robinson, “The way a story is told, its angle of vision, has everything to do with what it means....All of the Gospels share one element: the skepticism of the earliest witnesses. An artful anticipation of disbelief is so characteristic of all the Gospels that the reason for it is worth considering. The much-noted tendency of the disciples to miss the point, the emphasis the telling gives to their failures of comprehension, might be described as a narrative strategy, for maintaining and honoring a human perspective, for making simultaneous sense of the utterly human and the wholly divine.”

Yet to counter disbelief, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus meets Mary Magdalene and the other Mary on their way to tell the disciples, “He has been raised from the dead”; in Luke’s Gospel, a stranger joins two of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who eventually recognize him as Jesus in the breaking of bread; in John’s Gospel, Mary Magdalene mistakes the risen Lord for a gardener until he calls her name, and Thomas is invited to touch Jesus’ wounds. Mark’s Gospel has none of this. He gives us an empty tomb, the testimony of a young man dressed in white, and three women fleeing the scene in terror and amazement, saying nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

I repeat: Mark gives us enormous room to doubt, to disbelieve. Having surely listened to many stories about Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances himself, Mark’s omission of them in his Gospel makes me wonder if Mark’s own coming to belief, Mark’s encounter with the risen Christ, was an encounter with words that compelled him to write a Gospel for us. To borrow the conclusion of the late, great preacher and teacher of the church Fred Craddock, perhaps for Mark “the recollection of the words of Jesus is the stuff of faith.” The young man tells the fearful women that Jesus has been raised and has gone ahead of them to Galilee. There they will see him, *just as he had told them*. That is as close as we get to Jesus’ resurrection in Mark, and for

Mark it is close enough.

The words of the young man sent me back to read Mark's Gospel in one sitting this week, to read Mark's spare words from the beginning and listen to them from the perspective of Mark's ending. Three things struck me. First, Mark's disdainful portrayal of the disciples, who miss the import of most everything Jesus says and does, was daunting. In particular, Jesus' three predictions of his suffering, death and resurrection highlight how clueless they are. After the second prediction that follows on the heels of Jesus' transfiguration, Mark reports that "They kept the matter to themselves, questioning what this rising from the dead could mean."

Second, the characters that know who Jesus is are the death-dealing characters that oppose him. They identify him as the Son of God who has come to defeat the power of death wherever he encounters it. And curiously, every time Jesus is victorious over death, he tells the one given a whole new life to keep the matter secret, until he is raised from the dead. In other words, only after God's defeat of death will the eternal significance of Jesus' actions be knowable.

Third, I was struck with the drumbeat of Mark's insistence that in Jesus we have to do with God's Son. From his first sentence, "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God"; to God's voice heard only by Jesus and Mark's readers at his baptism, declaring, "You are my Son, the Beloved"; to the demons who shout, "What have you to do with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God?"; to the voice from out of the cloud that overshadowed three disciples on the mount of Transfiguration saying, "This is my Son, the Beloved, listen to him"; to Jesus' reply when the high priest asked him, "Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One" and Jesus says, pointblank, "I am"; to the centurion at the foot of the cross, declaring, "Truly this man was God's Son!" As much room as Mark's gives us to doubt, he writes as one who

believes.

The wager of Mark's Gospel--given the interplay of unreliable disciples and terrified women; of the power of death defeated and finally silenced; and of Mark's unblinking testimony that this man is God's Son--Mark's wager is that, through the "intimate realm of human speech," you and I will become witnesses to the living presence of Jesus of Nazareth. To wit: when the young man says to the women that Jesus "has been raised," he uses the present perfect tense, a tense that locates Christ's resurrection neither in the past nor the future, but in the action of God that is, through Christ, perfectly present. Jesus meets us just as surely in our time as he met those who were eyewitnesses in Galilee. Therefore, according to Mark, you and I are as likely to encounter him, to be surprised by his living presence, as the clueless disciples or the terrified women. Because he lives, according to Hans Kung, "The New Testament Easter testimonies... are meant to be *not* testimonies to the *resurrection as event but* testimonies to the *risen one as person.*"

Where, then, shall we seek him who is perfectly present? If the empty tomb tells us anything (and it really tells us very little, according to most theologians), it tells us that the tomb is not where we should look. Death was not Jesus' destination, nor is it ours. The one who was crucified and has been raised now goes ahead of us to Galilee, where we will see him just as he told us. Seek him first, then, in his telling: in the words of Scripture, words that come to life through the work of God's Spirit, words that give up their meaning only in the midst of the community whose story Scripture is, words that invite us into the conversation for which we were made, with the God who has chosen not to be God without us. Then seek him who has gone before you to Galilee, seek him in the places where you do your living and your dying. Indeed, if it is as he has told us, we will encounter him on this side of the grave wherever love trumps

death, wherever demons are being exorcised, wherever disease and decay do not have the final word over the body, wherever tax collectors and sinners dine, wherever the despised and rejected (even those despised and rejected by Christians) are vindicated. I tell you, his living presence will continue to surprise you for the rest of your life, and even at the hour of your death.

But what of the other side of the grave? If, like the women, you cut and run for your life, convinced (even relieved) that only the grave awaits you and those whom you love, then you may live believing that the recovered body parts are all that remains of the 150 lives smashed to smithereens on the side of a mountain in France, believing that death has the final word over the lives of Christian students in Kenya, believing those you have loved, until death finally parted you, lie moldering in the grave. Or you can live in a hope, born of promise and the love that never quits, believe that the destination of each of those precious, unrepeatable human beings is God; that they have been given an embodied life wholly redeemed by the love that is stronger than death; that none of who they are, not a single smile or tear, is lost to God.

Though finally, I am both chagrined and relived to confess to you--in light of the fact that the vast majority of worshippers will, indeed, cut and run; and also because, absent the terror or the amazement of the women, those of us who do return to these pews likely will say nothing to anyone—I must confess that there is no earthly reason for Mark to have placed any confidence in us as witnesses to the risen Christ. In fact, after all of this wrestling with his ending, now that I think about it, Mark's confidence was not in our witness: his confidence was in Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified and has been raised. His confidence was in the promise that the crucified and risen one is going ahead of us all, just as he told us. His confidence was in the God who swallowed up death and, in so doing, let Jesus loose in the world. The gospel of Easter is just this: "Jesus has promised an encounter with him against which there is no assured defense.

God will be put off neither by our failures, or infidelity, nor by our most sophisticated interpretive schemes” according to the late Don Juel, a friend and relentless wrestler with Mark’s ending. “And if this ‘good news about Jesus Christ’ is God’s work within the intimate realm of human speech [if the recollection of the words of Jesus is the stuff of faith], there is reason to hope that our defenses will finally prove insufficient and that we will not have the last word.” There is reason to hope, in Jesus Christ, that God has and God is the last word. That word is love, the love that is stronger than death. Alleluia! For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed!*