

“The Rest of the Story.... “ an Easter sermon by the Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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TEXT: 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. 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

And the women said nothing....

When is the last time you have been dumbfounded? I mean left seriously speechless, where there are no words to express your emotion.

Perhaps it was during the rising of the yellow harvest moon this past week. Perhaps it was in the mixed thrill and terror of a lightening bolt striking a tree nearby. People have been moved by a butterfly breaking from its cocoon – and equally struck dumb when at witnessing a horrible accident – an athlete falling or someone hit by a car.

The movie *The Reader* affected me that way. I did not trust my reaction, my ability to respond, for some 24 hours. I was equally stunned into silence at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. I truly did not know whether to cry “abomination” at the opulent fixtures and tourist trapping, or to kiss the ground in reverence.

Surely you can think of a place of fear and trembling. I know that some members of this congregation have been going through such profound trials and painful losses that I do not know how to respond, what to say.

Sometimes an experience is beyond words. This is the picture Mark paints as he ends his Gospel. Jesus does not appear. There is only the empty tomb, and it inspires not faith, but fear and amazement. Instead of joy, there is trembling. Overcome... Overwhelmed... The women are silent.

Do you remember the TV comedy drama M*A*S*H? Set in a field medical unit during the Korean war, the lives of the medical team consist of moments of sheer panic interspersed with eons of tedious boredom. They are ever ready for distractions. BJ Honeycutt receives a package from home with a mystery novel. The whole camp is excited. Everyone wants to get their hands on the book! BJ rips out chapters as he finishes them so they can be passed around. He gets to the end, but the last page is missing. His copy ends: "and the murderer is..." Everyone goes nuts. They debate different theories. In desperation, they use Radar's radio to track down the author. But she's written so many mysteries, she gets confused, tells them the wrong answer. They figure out the person she names couldn't possibly have done it. The dilemma ends, Unresolved and irresolvable.

Mark's gospel is a little like that. The ending drives us nuts! It is a cliffhanger, and we all react like the MASH camp, agitating to have an answer, a completion. The original Greek actually ends mid sentence. It seems unresolved and irresolvable.

I am sure that BJ, Hawkeye, and Major Winchester are still trying to figure out that mystery book's ending! But I think that Mark's Gospel is asking something else from us.

Consider the women. These faithful could hardly wait for the Saturday Sabbath to be over. At dawn they went shopping for burial spices and proceeded to the tomb. They were nervous, apprehensive, wrapped in grief. As they approached, they see that the huge rock has already been moved. Inside they found a stunning young man, calmly announcing "Don't be afraid...He had risen! He is not here!" And he gives Jesus' forwarding address: "He is going ahead to Galilee." Do you wonder they are stunned – they were deeply troubled – it is the same word Mark used to describe how Peter, James and John felt at the transfiguration). Something has gone wrong. Or maybe, something has gone so right that they can't take it in.

This is where Mark leaves the story -- with the men too afraid to come and the women too astounded to speak. Do they miss the point one more time? Or do they get the point? Do you think they understand?

God's absence can be easier than God's presence. We know how to deal with dead Saviors. We honor them with perfumes and spices, so that we can return to the sanity and predictability of our normal lives. Wilderness is just another disappointment, another familiar place of tragedy.

Far more terrifying than the crucifixion is the prospect of a resurrection that is about new life that God is bringing forth from the most unlikely places in the most unlikely ways. Far more terrifying is the revelation that we must give "our everything and our all" to God in Christ. Far more terrifying is the call to Galilee.

Resurrection is an inspiration, a new covenant with God, and an intervention that leads to transformation. It always requires something of us. Our contemporary monthly Jazz Vespers has gotten me interested in some of our jazz greats. I was reading about a jazz musician, Thomas Dorsey, who, in 1932, almost gave up trying to eke out a living. When his wife Nettie died while giving birth to their child, he completely lost faith. He felt abandonment and despair. But God's still small voice called him back to life. As the son of a Baptist minister, Dorsey decided he would sing instead of sorrowing, he would love instead of hating, he would trust instead of disbelieving. His first hymn was the famous "Precious Lord take my hand Lead me on, let me stand I am tired, I am weak, I am worn Through the storm, through the night Lead me on to the light; Take my hand precious Lord, Lead me home." Dorsey provided music for performers such as Tampa Red, Ma Rainey, and Bessie Smith, writing some 200 songs in his lifetime. Easter isn't just about dying. It's about the power of belief in a world of lost hope. It is about knowing that no situation is beyond God's redeeming power. Joyce Hollyday tells the story of a volunteer who was assigned to tutor children in a large city hospital. It wasn't until she got outside one boy's room that she realized that it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and walk out. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with nouns

and adverbs." This boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through his English lesson, ashamed at putting him through such a senseless exercise. The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" Before the teacher could finish her outburst of apologies, the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live." The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. The boy said: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a boy who was dying, would they?"

My own personal stories of resurrection are calls from death to life that have required something new and radical from me. The most dramatic was my recovery from drug addiction. Many of you know the story. Having been imprisoned in a destructive affair with cocaine, I finally freed myself. The first year of recovery was baby steps – I could actually brush my teeth or have a celebration without cocaine. When I looked up, I realized that my one-year anniversary fell on Easter! It was an astonishing God moment. No one can plan something like that. A year of recovery meant I could trust it and I could walk in a new way. My Easter resurrection led directly to my enrollment in Seminary.

Why does Mark end his story at the tomb? When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb -- and when a gospel ends in the middle of a sentence. This story isn't over. It is beginning.

Instead of giving us the ending to the mystery story, Mark asks us to move forward in trust, to risk the absurdity of following a Risen One, to believe in the possibility of life. He doesn't want us to figure out the story, he wants us to live into its on-going unfolding.

For Mark Jesus' resurrection is not about resuscitating a corpse; it's about resuscitating a community. The crucifixion leaves unfinished business. The resurrection says, get back out there into the world, folks; that's where Jesus is-- not at the tomb, not in the sanctuary, not up on the mountaintop --but out there where people fish for a living, or sell shoes and raise their kids, where orphans and widows struggle to survive, where landowners exploit the peasant folk, where the homeless live in tent camps. For Mark the messianic mission continues on the countless streets of despair that enmesh our planet, wherever one people drains another people of basic life resources, wherever wars and hatreds divide and conquer, wherever people lose jobs and health and friends and no one is there to help

How do we break through our fear and follow Christ? We trust. We follow. We go to Galilee. Galilee is where the work is. Galilee is where Jesus is. We don't have to have seen Jesus to let Jesus work in our life. Perception is not always reality. The Easter call is to say "Yes" to the possibility that what you can see, say, hear, and know, isn't everything there is to see, say, hear and know.

In the end, the women probably didn't have to say anything. They did not have to speak words, which would be doubted or dismissed. They wore their experience. They evidenced their conversion.

Their experience changed them. And it will change you. “He has been raised...He is not here...he is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you. “ Where is your Galilee? We all have our Galilees. Where are you called to meet Jesus? Where is the world waiting for you?