

Asbury UMC Mark 16:1-8  
April 4, 2021 Christ is Risen  
Doug Cunningham

When I was 50 I experienced a powerful calling to start New Day church in the Bronx. It was a dream come true - Asian, Dominican, White, Puerto Rican, Black, mixed race, gay and straight, lesbian and trans, professional and homeless. A mix of humanity crossing the boundaries that divide us, worshiping our common Creator, growing in faith. Eighty percent of the members were in their 20s and 30s, most had never imagined themselves in church, but when they started coming they joined the worship team, started tithing, a dozen of them preached sermons, five went on to seminary.

And then there came a time when I realized that just as God had called me to start this church, so God was calling me to leave. It was time for these young adults to choose their own leadership, someone of their own

generation. Through a long, intensive search process we found Tabatha, a 25 year old dynamic preacher, Lesbian Black woman, who had been worshiping with us for a year and was just about to graduate from seminary.

It was sad and hard for me to leave but Tabatha gave me an inkling of hope. When I heard her preach for the first time, I could see that God was anointing her for this ministry. Her face was glowing and my tears began to flow - grief mixed with profound joy.

I think we are accustomed to sadness, even despair. But hope is what overwhelms us. The idea that even in our grieving, God is at work making all things new.

Hearing Tabatha preach that first sermon I recognized that my leaving was necessary and important and that while it felt like a kind of death, it was more profoundly a resurrection.

A couple weeks later Melissa Hinnen, the former pastor here, called me and said she was moving to Brooklyn. She thought Asbury might be a good fit for me. So I called my District Superintendent and told her I was interested. And I found there was still life-giving ministry for me, that it wasn't an end but a new beginning.

By the time we've lived a few decades we've gotten used to disappointment, sadness, even despair. We've gotten the idea that all good things must come to an end. We don't like it but we accept it as reality. What we're not used to is hope. In the midst of our darkness comes a light and suddenly we realize that God is making all things new, that death is not the way of God but resurrection.

Never has there such a more profound experience of this breakthrough as the first Easter Sunday, the foundation of our faith. Mary the mother of Jesus and Mary Magdalene and Salome were facing

unspeakable grief, keeping watch at the foot of the cross as Jesus was crucified. A mother should never have to bury her child, the son that she birthed from her body, nursed, weaned, raised, worried over, stood by. To watch him persecuted, arrested and tortured to death after all his friends had fled, to stand by helpless in his time of anguish, to watch them place his body in the grave.

But Mary and her friends Mary and Salome knew how to grieve. Just as we know how to grieve. We have funerals, receive the condolences of loved ones, and visit the cemetery. We never get over the grief. The intensity of the pain may subside and we learn to carry on with its heaviness. We put our departed loved one's picture on the wall and on the coffee table. In our stories and actions we keep their memory alive.

When my sister Susan died in an automobile accident three weeks after her 22nd birthday, the world as I knew it came to an end. She

had become one of my best friends, attended my seminary graduation and then she was gone. Was this really the way of the world?

I shared my deep sorrow with my minister that she had died at a young age and never got to become all she was becoming. He said, "What if she's still becoming?" I appreciated the thought and continued in my grieving.

Mary and Mary and Salome were likely still in shock early on that Sunday morning, but they knew what to do with their grief. They gathered spices and headed to the grave to anoint his body. The only question was how to roll away the gravestone. They'd seen the soldiers put Jesus' body in a burial cave and roll a massive boulder to seal the entrance. But when they arrived the stone had been rolled away.

They entered the tomb. There was a young man dressed in a white robe and now they were alarmed. As angels usually do, this one

started with, "don't be alarmed." Do angels really think that's going to help people be less afraid. Maybe it's just angel humor. I'm talking face to face with an angel and I'm supposed to not be alarmed. And then the angel says: "You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, he has been raised, he is not here."

Earlier they were stricken with grief, but they knew what to do. Now they are completely undone, utterly overwhelmed with no idea what to say or do.

The angel gives them very clear instructions: "Go and tell his disciples that he's been raised and go to Galilee to meet him there." Very clear. And what did they do?

"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 that's the end of Mark's gospel. Decades later, the church was so unsettled by that ending that it added 12 more verses in which the women tell Peter and many of the disciples see the risen Jesus. And that's reasonable, at some point we assume they did tell Peter because he and the other disciples came back together and communed with Jesus and resumed their ministry.

But Mark ended his gospel with this reaction to resurrection: "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."

Terror and amazement.

I have no doubt about the resurrection of Jesus as historical reality. The evidence is undeniable in the behavior of the disciples. When Jesus was arrested the 12 disciples went into hiding. That makes sense. Crucifixion was terrorism - like lynching during

Jim Crow and other acts of terror - it's purpose was to paralyze a people with fear. The message of this public execution made clear to his followers that they needed to be very afraid of the violent power of the state.

We understand their hiding. But how could we explain what happened next? We know that Peter, James, John, Mary, and Salome all defied the Roman terrorism, came back together, preached Christ crucified and risen, healed the sick and continued the ministry of Christ with more boldness than when Jesus walked among them, started churches which exist to this very day.

Peter, James, John, Paul and other leaders of the early church were all executed by the state just as Jesus was. How do we account for this shocking transformation from expected fear to fearless boldness? I see only one explanation - that they believed what they said they believed and preached. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, they knew that Jesus had

risen from the grave. They were eyewitnesses and believed so deeply that they were willing to die for their discipleship.

And I find Mark's original ending very compelling, the honest first response of the women to the news of resurrection. "They fled for terror and amazement had seized them and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid."

How do you end a gospel of hope on the word *afraid*? (Slow and quiet). Because we are more afraid of hope than we are of despair. There is no fear like the fear of resurrection. Because it turns everything upside down. We don't like mourning and despair, but at least we know how to act. But what do you do with a belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ which opens the grave to resurrection for us all?

It overthrows everything you've come to count on. What you thought was an end becomes a

beginning. You discover that the powers that be are not actually the ones with the power. The ones who killed Jesus because he threatened their status quo were not victorious. They could put him in the grave but they could not keep him there. And they could not stop the movement. The powers and institutions and systems that run the world and order our lives, it turns out they don't have the power they claim to have.

Think for a minute about how believing that on a day to day basis would change some things. Because to one extent or another, we have come all to accept the way Empire. government, banks, corporations, Amazon, run our lives. We accept the rules of the game, not because we think they are fair or good or just, but because they are what is. (Quiet) What if they are not what is?

I'm not suggesting that we foolishly get ourselves into trouble. These institutions do have the power to make our lives difficult if we

cross them. We have to make strategic choices. But let's not simply accept the values and structure of society as ultimate reality.

What are the values and practices that God is calling us to? What if the one who actually has the power of life is calling us to share our resources with the poor, cross the boundaries that society has established of race and class, and do justice and love righteousness, forgive debt, and make sure that all the people of the world have basic healthcare and wellbeing.

What if we really are called to love God with all our heart, mind and strength and our neighbor as ourselves. What if we are called to do just as the angel said and just as Mary and Salome and Peter eventually did, even though we like they are afraid to do it? Go out and tell others that Jesus Christ is risen! Yeah, go to your neighbor, get out and proclaim that the law of the land is liberty for the captives and freedom for all who are oppressed. Maybe terror and amazement will

overcome you too. Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

The powerful have only the power of death to enforce their corrupt and rapacious schemes, and Jesus offers the power of life. Jesus Christ is Lord! Death is not the end. We may mourn for the night but joy comes with the morning. In faith we do not need to fear or worry, but can turn all of that energy toward believing, creating, trusting, growing and healing. Christ is alive and leads us into life abundant.

If we are willing to live a resurrection life, and it's not an easy decision to make, it's not a comfortable place to go, but if we choose to believe what is real, if we choose to live our lives not according to the values of the systems of death but in the power of the resurrection of Christ, then a lot is going to be different.

This is not just a head game, we're talking about here. This is not just about saying Christ is risen, Alleluia on Easter Sunday and then going back to business as usual on Monday. And that's the challenge here.

Power in the world is based primarily on who is able and willing to kill others. The wealthy and powerful maintain their power by killing at the border, or by kneeling on a neck, by deciding which lives matter and which don't, by hoarding resources for some and denying resources and opportunities to others, to kill by denying health care.

Under our current system most people in the world do not have enough to eat. Although the world produces more than enough food to feed the global population—but more than 690 million people still go hungry.[4] After steadily declining for a decade, world hunger is on the rise, affecting 8.9 percent of people globally.

More on military than on education.

So to buck the systems and institutions that base their survival and power on their ability to keep you in debt, to keep you afraid, to keep you doubting your worthiness, to keep you struggling just to make ends meet, to keep you begging them to give you a job and pay you enough to live on - to buck that system takes a certain amount of boldness.

And that's the challenge here. Theologian Peter Rollins was asked, "Do you deny the resurrection?"

And he said, "Yes, I do deny the resurrection." Every time I walk away from someone in need, every time I participate in an unjust system, every time I follow the rules of the Empire of death and forsake faith in Jesus' way of life. This is not a head trip, it's a life trip, a decision about how we're going to live our lives and where we're going to put our faith.

Easter means the power of life is greater than the power of death. Jesus was a working class Galilean in a world where Galilean lives didn't matter. He dared to challenge the status quo and the powers that be moved immediately to have him executed on a cross. They put him in the grave and thought they'd won.

Easter means that the resurrection wins out over execution, life over death and that turns the ways of the world upside down.

Share the news. Tell a friend, invite a neighbor to come and see. Jesus Christ is risen. Alleluia.