

Easter Day (Year B) – April 5, 2015
Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
or Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

The Resurrected Jesus...Loose in the World

This year we have been guided by the gospel of Mark in the reporting of the arrest, trial, crucifixion, and the empty tomb and Resurrection of Jesus. As Frederick Buechner points out, Mark was in a real hurry.ⁱ He seems to have had no time to lose, and that's the way it was for the community for which he was writing, as well. Mark wrote his gospel (the earliest of the four gospels) in a stark, quick style and he left a lot out that the later gospel writers put in.

Mark ends his gospel much the same way, in the sparest manner, finishing almost in mid-sentence. The authorities were out for their blood, and Mark and his community were on the run. There was no time to gather up all the loose ends. Their whole world seemed to be at loose ends. So, Mark speaks of the three women going to the tomb of Jesus and finding it empty. A young man in white is sitting there inside the open tomb. "He has been raised..." the young man said, "Go tell his disciples... that he is going ahead of you to Galilee..." The women then run out from the tomb as if everything is on fire. And it ends: "for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Period. End of Gospel. Now later editors added a few extra verses to "complete" what was in their view an incomplete account. But Mark ends it there—his last word in his gospel is "*afraid*." But just what does that last word mean?

Mark knew how those women felt as they fled. The women had returned to the tomb to finish the burial preparations that had been interrupted by the coming of the Sabbath. These women disciples who had the nerve to stand by, with their eyes and hearts open at the foot of Jesus' cross, were also the ones with the nerve to attend the grave when the Sabbath was over. Although Jesus had been executed and his other disciples scattered, these women hung in. They refused to go quietly away. Their actions of love and solidarity, memory and mourning, and the freedom of their continuing open association has been compared to the Mothers (and Sisters) of the Disappeared in various South and Central American countries, standing watch in one plaza or another.ⁱⁱ Yet even these who had exhibited a courage, tenderness and love for Jesus that the somewhat more self-important and fearful group of eleven remaining men seemed to lack - these women were themselves startled, perplexed, and frightened when they discover the tomb empty and the young messenger inside who told them Jesus had been raised. In the abrupt ending of Mark's gospel, the fear of these otherwise fearless women is the final punctuation.ⁱⁱⁱ This word "afraid" of course refers not only to terror and fear of terrible things, but also amazement and awe of wonderful things. As Buechner put it, Mark's gospel narrative of the empty tomb is as shadowy and incomplete as life itself.^{iv} And he adds, "When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt;"^v—namely, that Jesus who was crucified, dead and buried, was again fully alive and at large, loose in the world. These women

feared God alone, and their knees buckle to imagine the transforming power that had then and there been unleashed, overcoming even the finality of death. Wonderful and terrible things were happening and were still to come.

Mark and his community knew what fear was all about—the steps, the midnight bang on the door—but they also knew that this type of fear was not the last thing. For although the last word written by Mark was “afraid,” the last words *spoken* in this gospel were words of *awesome* hope - when the young messenger from God said, “there you will see him, just as he told you.” Now if that were true, and Mark knew it was, it was so *awesome* that the word “afraid” was all that Mark could find to describe it. So Mark ended it there.

Terror and amazement weren't just First Century phenomena. They're what we've known well in our lifetime, from wars great and small, from the rise and fall of empires both political and religious, to ideologies played out from a fundamentalist or left or right direction. Much has been played out and lies in ruins, and much is still being played out. And not just on a global scale—we also know this on a local and personal level. Under the clouds of war far away and economic and social upheaval very close to home, our days are worrisome if not fearful.

But the proclamation of Easter is that all shall be well. Let me say this again: the proclamation of Easter is that all shall be well. Now, we don't say this with the easy optimism of those who have never known a time when all was not well, but rather we say this as a human race who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory. We have known one way or another what it is like to live feeling separated from God. But in the end, God's will, not ours, will be done. Love is the ultimate Victor. Death and death-making are not the end. The end is life—for all. God's gift of life, and resurrected life, has greater depths of awesome mystery and blessing than even the most hopeful visionary has ever dared to dream. Jesus Christ is Risen—a most awesome fact—and he is still loose in the world, repairing and restoring it, all the while recruiting people like you and me to join him in his effort.

The abruptness of Mark's resurrection account leaves us with a question, namely, what will you and I do with the awesome news of resurrection personally and pastorally, publicly and prophetically? Starting with our own lives, Jesus' Resurrection puts forward a choice between living a constricted, fearful, and self-preoccupied life on the one hand, or a living a life in the *awesome* freedom and newness of the Resurrected Christ on the other hand.

That is not to say that confronting the Risen Jesus may not prompt as many fears as it calms. The early community of disciples was shaken to its roots as much by the awesomeness of Easter as by the terror of Good Friday. The Living God not only raised Jesus from the dead, but that occasioned a new thing God was doing in them to enable them to begin again – to become “an Easter people in a Good Friday world.”^{vi} Christ's resurrection promises our own resurrection, and not just in our afterlife or on some final Day, but here and now as Christ Risen *for* us is also *in* us, putting love in our hearts, decent thoughts in our heads, and a little more courage in our spines, as William Sloane Coffin put it.^{vii} And that means a new and renewed way of interacting with others in love

and respect, and with the wider, fearsome world in doing justice and seeking peace.^{viii} Easter isn't a safe holiday. At the core of our faith is the awesome and unsettling fact of Jesus Risen who cannot be constricted nor entombed, and who desires the same for us. He is not absent from it all but is alive and *loose* in this world *and* in our hearts, inviting each of us to join him in continuing God's ongoing mission of restoration of our lives and repair of the world.

Alleluia. Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed. Alleluia.

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), pp. 96-99.

ⁱⁱ See Bill Wylie-Kellerman, "The Opening Door" in Living the Word (Washington, D.C.: Sojourners, 1996), p. 60

ⁱⁱⁱ These women who feared neither men nor powerful forces of their day, ironically, feared an empty tomb.

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, Peculiar Treasures, *Ibid.*

^v Full quote: "It doesn't have the ring of great drama. It has the ring of truth. If the Gospel writers had wanted to tell it in a way to convince the world that Jesus indeed rose from the dead, they would presumably have done it with all the skill and fanfare they could muster. Here there is no skill, no fanfare. They simply seem to be telling it the way it was. The narrative is as fragmented, shadowy, incomplete as life itself. When it comes to just what happened, there can be no certainty. That something unimaginable happened, there can be no doubt." - Frederick Buechner, Whistling in the Dark (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), p. 42.

^{vi} The phrase "an Easter people in a Good Friday world" is attributed by some to Barbara Johnson, Splashes of Joy in the Cesspools of Life (W Publishing Group/Thomas Nelson, 1992), pp. 193ff. – although I have used this phrase since I first heard it from both Bishop Barbara Harris and William Sloane Coffin in the 1980s.

^{vii} William Sloane Coffin, Living the Truth in a World of Illusions (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 70

^{viii} It means encountering within ourselves that fear of changing from the false security of our own constricted, "entombed" views of life with their old habits, old illusions, old prejudices, old grievances, old discontents, to a new freedom.