

Mark 16: 1-8/Acts 17:22-34  
Some Scoffed; but Others...

Background

This Sunday, the 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Easter is considered “Lo Sunday” amongst clergy. It’s traditionally “lo energy and lo attendance.” Add to that that it’s Spring break and it’s snowing and as someone said to me this morning, it’s a perfect storm.

Last week you heard the Easter story as read by Joann & Howard this morning too. You heard how the Easter story ended in Mark, “The women said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.” The End! Ken, shared last week, “If the story of Jesus ended the way it does in Mark, we would not be celebrating Easter right now because no one would have found out about it.” Later, the women did indeed tell Peter and the disciples—story got out. In Acts you heard the passage last week that Jesus said, “you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth.” Later, in the book of Acts, Paul witnesses to the resurrection of the dead in the Areopagus in Athens, Greece. Listen for their response to the gospel...

Prayer

Living God, help us to hear your Holy Word that we may truly understand; that, understanding, we may believe, and believing, we may follow in all faithfulness and obedience, seeking your honor and glory in all that we do; through Christ our Lord. Amen

Message

I want to begin by sharing with you a narrative by Walter Wangerin in his book, *Reliving the Passion*. It’s written from Mary Magdalene’s point of view. It follows the text from Mark, Mary Magdalene has gone with Salome, and Mary the mother of James to the tomb. An angel has told her that Jesus has been raised from the dead. She runs back and tells the disciple, Peter. This is how Wangerin imagines that meeting:

Peter, hold me. Just hold me. I can’t stop shaking. Feel it? Hold me tight. I stood in the place where Moses stood, and the world is spinning so fast—

Listen: oils and spices, ointment jars. That’s it. Our hands were full, but that’s all we carried. Honestly, nothing for ourselves, all for the body of Jesus. Mary and Salome and me. We went outside the city wall. The sun was just rising. Dew on the grass was white, so that we made three trails behind us. And we cast long shadows. There was a sparrow. We wanted to honor Jesus. We were going to touch him. I thought about the smell.

Old Mary was crying.

Suddenly she stopped and said that we were fools, that we couldn’t anoint him.

She made me angry.

“Who’s going to stop us,” I shouted. “Who cares for a criminal’s corpse?”

“No,” the old woman said, “that’s not it. You saw it, too.”

“Saw what?”

“The stone. Who will roll the stone from the door?”

“Mary! I will, all right?” I was so mad I really felt I could do it alone. I had seven furies in my breast. I didn’t wait. I swept ahead with long strides, raging. Oh, I had such hate for the world and all things and God---

But the stone was rolled back.

No, Peter, listen! This is a very big stone, a very heavy stone, not even you could move it *uphill*, don’t you see? But the door of the tomb was open! All my feelings went straight to fear. Something was wrong. I wasn’t mad, I was panicking.

I dropped the ointments. I crept forward and went down on my knees and looked inside-

Do you remember what you told me about Moses and Elijah with Jesus on the mountain, and you saw all three of them, and a cloud came, and Jesus grew so bright it blinded you, and the voice of God came down and roared, remember? Peter, I believe you now. And I kiss you, dear friend because of it. I love you so much for telling me that story. O Peter, I know how you felt! I know exactly. It was terror, right? But more than that: fear and love together.

Listen! There was a young man in the tomb, dressed in white like Jesus on the mountain. But not Jesus! Jesus was not there!

This young man knew me. He knew what I was doing there. I never saw him before. He said, “You’re looking for Jesus. He has risen.”

Peter, are you listening? Do you understand? He said *risen!*

I didn’t scream.

The man pointed at a stone ledge inside the tomb and said, “He is not here. See the place where they laid him.” I did not scream then---but I stared at the bare ledge and started to shake, and I’ll tell you why. Terror. Fear and wonder and love all mixed in me, and my body couldn’t take it. Oh, Peter, I still can’t take it, but I believe it. I believe it. I stood in the spot where Jesus came back to life. That’s so holy. That’s so frightening. He isn’t the man I thought he was. He is the glory of God! I stood as close to God as Moses did, closer—and I’ll tell you why I didn’t scream. Because I couldn’t even breathe. I stared at the stone and I thought how he loved me, how he loves me, loves me, Peter, plain Mary from Magdala who had seven devils once and no prospects, and it was enough that he love me so long as he live, but then he died and it was nothing. But now think, Peter! Think how terribly mighty that love must be to *rise from the dead!* Peter, do you understand what I’m saying to you? This is the love of Almighty God the Father, now, right here! Right here! That’s why I’m shaking. Hold me. Hold me. I promise, I’m telling the truth. Hold me tight. Stop my shaking. Peter, believe me-

Well, well, and if you can’t believe me, come with me.

The young man in white told me to tell you what to do now, Simon.

Hold me just a little longer, dear, good, and stony Simon. It’s a killing terror isn’t it? Exquisite and sharp—a painful, impossible joy. Yes---But I am growing calmer now. Thank you. Here, let me kiss you. And now what?

Why, now we will go and see the Lord alive. And then you will believe me.

*For Jesus is going before us to Galilee; there you will see him, exactly as he promised.*

What passion! What emotion. I'm exhausted just reading how Mary was overwhelmed with fear and joy! She's just bursting with the news—the good news—the gospel! She has experienced the Holy! She believes in Jesus. She believes that he loves her and loves Peter and loves everyone. She can't wait to share the news, her experience, can't wait to be joyful together. She is so moved that she runs and effuses with joy to Peter and stony Peter is unmoved. According to Luke, Peter and the other apostles don't believe her. At first they don't believe that Jesus rose.

Has that ever happened to you--where you've hit a wall with someone? It's painful. It's painful to have someone you love not share in your joy—not share in your excitement over new found faith. It hurts to have them listen to your moving story and remain unmovable.

Our passage from Acts this morning tells of belief and unbelief. Like Mary and the other women, some believe when Paul proclaimed the resurrection of the dead. But like the disciples at first, others who heard Paul at the Areopagus scoffed. Here Paul is at the most important city of ancient Greece. He is an amazing orator—speaking to the Greeks in a style in which they are familiar. Trying to connect to them and connect them to Christ. And still some scoffed while others wanted to hear more.

It is frightening to share our faith with others. We risk not only rejection of the message but also of the messenger. Mary's and Paul's experience of not being believed happens over and over today. We get excited and share with someone only to have them basically say, "Great, that's great for you, but it doesn't really work for me." At times our faith can be made an obstacle in our relationships. We can fear losing the friendship if we're perceived to have become a Jesus fanatic.

Some of us here today are like Mary desperately wanting those we love to believe. If so take heart, knowing that many will not believe your experience—they will not see the Risen Lord. But you are not alone. Jesus is with you AND you join with the courageous saints like Mary who have risked and continue to talk about our Lord.

Others of us here today are like the disciples—you gather together—but don't quite believe. You can't wrap your head and heart around believing in a Risen Lord. You aren't quite/ ready to believe/ if it means having your life thrown upside down by the news. If so take heart, knowing that you are not alone, God is eagerly waiting for you and loving you still.

For Mary and Paul and for many of us faith is fear and love all mixed together. So why would we share our experience with others—why wouldn't we just tuck it in our hearts and savor it? I think we share because we love God so much—because God loves us so much—that we want those we love to know God's love. We want them to experience and know the joy that we know--to know that they are known and loved by the God of the universe.

And as one writer pointed out—we are still commissioned even in the face of unbelief. Jesus calls us to spread the Word. And he helps us do it. When we experience God in a powerful way—we are empowered to share. We don't share to get converts—to increase our numbers. We let it out because we can't hold it in. We've been wowed by God.

You may be sitting here though thinking, I believe but I've never had that wow experience. I was raised going to church; I've been involved in church activities—but I never had that big faith event. I think it's important to clarify what we're talking about here. Mary and Paul both experienced the Risen Lord—that encounter led them to faith. Faith is not just a wow feeling. It is a commitment to surrender your life—to be open to having your life be turned upside down. Faith is not about keeping God/religion in 1 compartment of our lives like the Sunday morning/ twice a month box.

We need to be honest about what we believe, what we don't believe, and where we have doubts. Unbelief comes in many forms—we may say I believe—but do we live as people who are guided by that belief? Remember experience of the holy is not the faith. Experience can lead to faith—but faith is a mystery—it's a gift from God. It can't be reduced to formulas. People sometimes say, I'm not ready to share my faith yet—I don't know enough yet. What's so amazing about our passage today is that Jesus entrusts the Message to regular ordinary folks like us. As we grow in faith we desire to reach out and serve others—as we reach out and serve others we grow in faith. They're not linear, but intertwined. God doesn't wait for the Church or you to be perfect. Mary doesn't understand it all—but she knows that God has done something amazing.

When we hold onto that perspective we can experience great freedom in sharing. Understanding that God does the work is key. Faith is a gift from God and not the result of our really persuasive sharing of our testimony.

The stone has been move away--God has already done the work for us. In the same way—calling to faith and giving of faith is not our work. We're called to share with freedom because it depends on God not us. We're called to share knowing that some will reject the message—and it depends on God not us. We're called to tell our story—because when we truly do we tell God's story. God overcomes obstacles of fear & unbelief and intellectual stumbling blocks. God isn't dependent on us but does use us. God finds a way—beyond death, fear, unbelief.

We need to trust. Trust in the Spirit to work. We need to open up ourselves and share passionately from our hearts and our minds. We can share our previous doubts & our current struggles with faith.

I was talking with someone this week about a time when she felt the closest to God. She said “you're not gonna believe this, but once I was on a retreat, and I was going on a walk. And at one point I stopped and I looked up I saw the Risen Christ with a crown of thorns. I shook my head and looked away, and I looked back and it was still there. I felt God's Holy presence.” Like her, and like Mary at those sacred moments we may be filled with terror. When we let down our walls of security we can be so close to God that we are afraid. But we are also then filled with joy beyond our imagining or containing. When we share those holy moments with others some may scoff, but others....

Amen.

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