

“Go and Tell”
Mark 16:1-8
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Easter Sunday

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It is no accident that Easter begins at the tomb. At deep dawn, on the first day of the week, the women come with spices, ready to anoint Jesus’ dead body, in a loving ritual whose frank aim is to keep decaying flesh from smelling bad. “It isn’t a very pretty image,” one writer notes. “Death never is.” But death is what Jesus’ disciples came to deal with that first Easter, early in the morning ... and so must we.

Now I know that nobody came to church this morning to hear about death and decay, but bear with me. Because Easter has no meaning without Jesus’ death. And what would resurrection mean to us but for our own mortality, and the loss of those we love, and the transient nature of this world? We see life most clearly with our noses pressed against death’s window; we cherish life most urgently when we know we will lose it.

It seems quaint now, but it used to be you could talk about death in polite company, but not politics and sex. Now it’s the other way around. Sex and politics flood the TV and talk radio and the Internet. But death – we’d rather not see it. I don’t wish anybody the sorrow of witnessing death, but it’s around us all the time. The television cameras captured the swath of destruction left in the wake of last week’s tornados in the Midwest; and this week’s suicide bombings in Mideast. And then there are the countless losses that go unrecorded, in the middle of Africa or in the middle of our families. Death is quite real, whether we want to see it up close and personal. When death touches our own lives, as it inevitably will, our culture suggests faint euphemisms, like “passed away,” and offers us “rituals of celebration” to mourn our dead. And some of us, when we think about our own

mortality – we ask our loved ones not to bother with a visitation, to skip the memorial service, to scatter our ashes. It's as if we could wish death away by pretending it doesn't exist.

But of course, death *does* exist, for all of us, and sooner or later we'll all face it. I can't tell you the number of times I've walked into the hospital room of someone who is terminally ill, who tells me, "I didn't realize how precious life is until now." The fact is, as one pastor says it "we are all terminal. It is just a matter of when someone signs the certificate. Our relationships are also terminal, as are our careers. You can try to hang onto everything for awhile, but what a silly way to live" (M. Craig Barnes, "We're All Terminal," *the Christian Century*, 4/6/04, p. 18).

What a silly way to live, indeed – as if death were not real.

We are hardly the first to avoid death. Even Jesus' closest disciples couldn't face it. They all fell away – even Peter, denying he even knew Jesus, let alone coming near the cross. In the end, only a few women followers could bring themselves to come near to death, to anoint their teacher's body.

Yet Easter begins at the tomb *because* death is real, and because Jesus' death is real. Anyone who saw Mel Gibson's "Passion of the Christ" appreciates in gruesome detail how very real Jesus' death was. And Easter didn't erase that death, as if it didn't happen. Jesus never got his old life back again. God didn't resuscitate his body. God raised him from the dead, to a new body, a different life. And, the promise of Easter is this: God will raise us too.

For anyone who has lost a loved one recently, or for that matter, long ago, the promise of God raising us from the dead matters very much. The promised resurrection gives us hope and confidence that we will meet again, that the people we loved, the people who loved us,

aren't swallowed up in death forever. Eternal life is given us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

But that's not *all* that Easter means to us. The resurrection isn't only about the life to come. The resurrection also calls us into new life *now*. The apostle Paul, in verses shortly after those we heard this morning, the apostle Paul reminds us, "do you not know that we have been buried with Christ by baptism, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too might walk in newness of life?" The God who called Jesus into new life – transformed life – can call us into new life too. The God who "reached into that tomb, and into history" can reach into our lives, and make them new.

We can't do it ourselves. We've tried – since the Enlightenment we've optimistically hoped that reason and human progress could save the world. But of course, they can't. Oh, our secular culture *can* provide scientific progress, and enlightened policies, and democratic rights. But humanism can't rescue us from meaningless busy-ness; nor can reason offer grace and forgiveness. Instead it hands us empty goals, like looking young and beautiful; it sells us fleeting things, like amassing expensive property; it holds out vain and silly aspirations, like power for the sake of power. It markets dead things, as if they could offer us life.

So why do we keep looking for life where there is none? Why do we keep looking for life at the mall or in the liquor cabinet or on a luxury vacation? Why do we keep expecting life to arrive in a fat acceptance packet from a university, or a string of pearls, or a lucrative job offer? why, to use the words of the prophet, why do we spend our money for that which is not bread, and our labor for that which does not satisfy? Why, when we know these are only imitation life-givers, only ersatz meaning-providers, why do we hang on to them as if they give us life?

Because as long as we hang onto these things, we'll never be able to reach the possibility that there is something more.

One pastor says it this way:

“In order to receive this new life, we have to stop clinging to the old one. ... We have to stop obsessing over the right career move, stop pressuring the kids to be perfect, stop fantasizing about what the latest diet will do for our bodies. It is all going to die anyway, so stop. And go to the empty tomb, where there is the promise of a new life that will never die” (Ibid.).

We may hear these words a thousand times and we are deaf to them. But sooner or later something happens that opens our hearts, and wham! We get it. And when we do, we never want to forget. “Help us,” our timeless funeral prayer begs God, “help us to walk amid the things of this world with eyes open to the beauty and glory of the eternal, so that ... our hearts may be fixed where true joy is to be found.” Help us to live with eyes wide open, so that we never forget.

And when we do, the angel tells us, we will meet the risen Lord in Galilee – that is, we will meet the risen Lord in all the places of our daily lives. At the office and in the kitchen, at the boardroom table and in the classroom, everywhere we live. And when we do, the angel also tells us, then we must go, and tell that we have seen the Lord ... tell that we have seen that death is not the last word ... tell that life begins again in spite of death, that the Lord is everywhere, if only we have eyes to see him.

It's rare that David Letterman makes it into a sermon, but there was a remarkable moment a few years ago when Dave was interviewing a close friend, the musician Warren Zevon. Zevon by then had received the diagnosis of terminal cancer. He didn't have long to live, and he knew it. Dave had the courage to ask him, gently, if he had anything to say to us, any advice to give to those of us who

don't have the taste of death in our mouths yet. Zevon paused, and said with wry sincerity, "Enjoy every sandwich."

"O, taste and see how the Lord is good," the Psalmist writes. Taste and see, and tell about the beauty and glory of the eternal now. Go and tell that you see new life in the birth of a child and the tenderness of love; go and tell that you see new life in the simple fact of waking up, in the air you breathe, in the taste of every sandwich. Because you never know when your witness to the truth of this new life, this *real* life, will help someone else's eyes be open.

A friend of mine, Chandler Stokes, tells how when he was in his doctoral program he sought out therapy. He was, he says, obsessive about grades:

"I remember telling [my therapist] that I really viewed an A+ as the only A that mattered, that an A felt like a C and that an A- felt like failure. During the course of our conversation he asked when the last time was that I went to a movie with [my wife] Karen. I said, 'Oh, it's probably been a year or so. ...' When the session was over and I was about to go, he said [in a directive way that counselors never ought to], 'Chandler, there's one thing I'd like you to know before you go today. Your decision to make sure you were getting all A's and not to bother to spend good time with Karen was a really IDIOTIC decision.' -- slowly, over the next few months, the light went on. I consider that conversation to be the one that saved my life" (from his paper at the 2000 Moveable Feast study group; he is currently pastor at First Presbyterian Church, Oakland, CA).

It saved his life, because someone had the courage to go and tell him – tell him where the risen Lord is truly to be found.

This morning, we begin at the tomb, with our noses pressed against the window of death, and there, where we least expect it, we find life. A life that sees the hand of God in everything. A life that

trusts that death is not the last word. A life that knows that there is more – much more – than meets the eye.

In a few minutes, when the service is over and we walk out the door this morning, we can go back to living as we usually do. We can worry over Sunday dinner, and whether the in-laws will get along. We can nag our kids about their homework, and gloat over our own success. We can wring our hands over the terrible state the world is in. Or we can stop hurling ourselves at stupid stuff that doesn't matter ... and we can choose to “waste” time with our family ... and we can walk knee-deep into the things that matter, like the muck of politics, or charities that do go works, and do our best to make the world a better place. We can let go of all the things that are meaningless and dead, and we can go back to Galilee, to see our Savior, risen from the dead. And then we can go and tell what we have seen, that others might finally, truly live.

I don't often close my sermons in prayer, but there is a prayer that has been echoing in my heart all week. It is a prayer from the Church of Scotland that we've started to use when babies are baptized in our congregation. Today, the day that we are all new-born, it is my heartfelt prayer that you will know the resurrection joy of life.

Let us pray.

Gracious God, touch us all again this day with the grace of [Christ's rising]. Give us new lives for old, new spirits, new faith, new commitment, in place of all that has grown tired and stale and dead in our lives. So may we rise and go from here, to whatever awaits, in joy, and trust. In the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.