

“Missing Easter”

Mark 16:1-8

April 12, 2020

Make no mistake—Easter begins in fear. It begins in those early morning hours when everything is too dark to see when our uncertainties and insecurities besiege us and what we knew for sure only hours before now seems entirely unreliable. Easter begins before daylight when we are most vulnerable to the unsettling power of fear and the brute force of loneliness. The dream was not the reality. The children are not okay. The bills will never be paid. Normalcy will never return. The tests will not be clear. The future is not secure. Death will have the final word. Easter begins in fear.

Three women rise before the sun. They gather burial spices and walk together to the tomb where they had seen the body of Jesus laid. The task could have waited until later in the day, of course. Dead bodies are in no rush after all. But these friends needed to be together in those uncertain early hours, just as a family gathers around the bedside at the moment of death. They needed the comfort of one another as a barricade against the relentless onslaught of grief.

What their eyes strain to see in the dawning light leaves them speechless. The stone rolled back. Man dressed in a shining robe. The words—“not here,” “been raised,” “ahead of you,” “go, tell the others.” The women literally run out of the tomb filled with fear. That’s where Easter begins. They said nothing to anyone, and Mark’s Gospel ends.

It’s the earliest account of the central story of our faith, and it ends in fearful silence. It ends with the vision of an empty tomb. The second-century editors would add to the awkward ending, as you will see in your Bibles. But that is not Mark. His abrupt ending is intentionally uncomfortable. Because Mark knew what

we are all learning. That Easter begins in the dark.

There have been moments when I’ve doubted the truth of those words—moments even this week. Moments when I’ve lamented the emptiness of this time. Easter is sometimes called the Super Bowl of church. It’s our biggest day. And who wants to play the Super Bowl in an abandoned stadium? We preachers may proclaim the empty tomb, but we want to proclaim it in a filled sanctuary. I know I do. I’ve heard it many times in recent days. *“I’m sure going to miss Easter this year.” “I’m really disappointed about missing Easter.”*

I can certainly relate to the sentiment. But the Gospel is clear on this: the empty tomb is the place where the Easter message is heard. The message of resurrection is met with fear. Darkness is the backdrop of beginnings. Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “Whether it is a seed in the ground, a baby in the womb or Jesus in the tomb [new life] starts in the dark.”ⁱ We can’t do much in the darkness—our human limitations are made clear when the lights are out. But God is not held back by darkness. We cannot miss Easter because the promise we proclaim today is not dependent on human ability. We don’t go to Easter. Easter comes to us.

I am convinced that Mark left his gospel open-ended because he knew that Easter does not end. Remember what the white-robed messenger said to the women. ***He is not here. He’s gone ahead of you. You will see him.*** He is not here. Well, this year, neither are you. And perhaps that is good news. Maybe this year the empty tomb and our empty sanctuaries tell of a God who is with us where we are and ahead of us as we go.

Mark leaves the command in our court: “Go.

Tell the others.” This year, we can do this in new and transformative ways. The time is right for testimony. In the midst of crippling fear and trying times, in the midst of uncertainty and grief, we are called to the courageous task of proclamation. We are called to tell the others. How can we who experience the joy of new life and resurrection share that joy now? How can we share the amazing good news that Jesus has gone ahead of us?

Not long ago, though it seems like the dream of another lifetime, I was with a group of pastors in North Carolina sharing insights and reflections on the vocation of preaching. One of my colleagues raised the question of Easter preaching. She acknowledged that some say Easter needs no sermon. Just repeat the story. Jenny wrote, “On the one hand, I like that. But more and more, I am convinced that is not enough. Karl Barth famously said that what brings people to worship is one unspoken question that clings to our hearts and minds: ‘Is it true?’ Isn’t that the case for us all, preachers included? In the face of all evidence to the contrary, please, assure me that resurrection is true. Assure me that our hope is indeed built on something real. Promise me that the Good News is more than a Feel-Good Story...tell me the ancient, beautiful story, but do not stop there. Tell me where you find truth within its words. Tell me why it matters to you. Tell me how and why you have hitched your life to it...Convince me it is true by telling me about the Gospel that flows through your veins with every heartbeat and is saving your life, even now...this Easter, please... the story I most need to hear is the one that only you can tell.”

The promise of the angel that first Easter morning was this—you will see him. The command was to tell the others. So, where have we seen him? Where have you seen Jesus set loose in the world to bring life and light and joy and hope? Where have you seen the power of God overcome the power of death? Where have you watched the Spirit move in mysterious ways? Where have you felt the presence of God in goosebumps, unexpected tears, unforeseen circumstances, and even overwhelming sadness?

Where has the risen Christ showed up in our lives, and in our church? Which story is the one that only you can tell?

I’ll start. When I was a child, Easter always began in the dark. Easter began when my father tapped lightly on my bedroom door in what seemed the middle of the night and ask if I still wanted to go. Even though what had seemed like a wonderful idea only six hours ago now had little appeal, I would always get up. The sunrise service happened once a year and I wouldn’t spend the next twelve months regretting that I had missed it. When we arrived at the church, my father and I would begin moving folding-chairs out onto the church lawn. The busy intersection of Vandavia and South Elm-Eugene was always deserted as we began our work by the glow of stoplights changing from red to green and back again. Before long, members of the church began to arrive, many carrying blankets for the cold metal chairs. I will never forget how those faithful souls looked in the predawn light, huddled together speaking words of greeting. I’ll never forget singing the words of the Easter hymns as the sun crept over the tree line. I’ll never forget the faithful geese whose annual flyover delighted us all, honking their hallelujahs as we laughed with wonder. I’ll always remember how that yard was slowly illuminated, along with the old wooden cross on the lawn, bare for six weeks, now covered with fresh cut flowers from our homes and yards. The symbol of death covered with signs of new life. Transformed as the sun rose before us. I will never regret the lost sleep or the early alarm and to this day, I never wake on Easter morning without thinking of that sunrise service, that transformation as the day was dawning.

A transformation. The ordinary becomes extraordinary. The empty tomb is teeming with life. The darkness gives way to brilliant light. The risen Son of God goes ahead of us, to Galilee. To the places where we live. If you don’t want to miss Easter, the secret is to go home and go on. The most consequential act of discipleship will never be coming to church. The truth is, if you stay too long in the sanctuary, you will miss Easter, which is already in front of you. The summons

of Easter is to go home, to go back to Galilee and to see it for what it truly is. Illuminated by resurrection power, overflowing with possibility. To return to your everyday life, with all its disappointments and frustrations and sorrows and see it for what it truly is. A gift freely given by God, an opportunity to find meaning and purpose. The challenge of Easter is to accept the most startling and sturdy truth that we can know: that in Jesus Christ we too have been resurrected and given a new chance. It happens where we are. Today, Easter comes to you—whether you are in your pajamas or your patent leather shoes, gathered with family or sitting in front of a screen all alone, distracted by the cries of a baby or surrounded by too much silence, ready to greet the day or still clinging to the night. My teacher Bill Brown wrote a beautiful reflection this week in which he made a suggestion for church leaders. This year, perhaps we should proudly display these words on our church marquee signs: “He is not here.” Easter begins with fear, but it ends with the courage to follow. The courage to face the worst this world can offer with a faith that defies reason. Jesus Christ is risen. Death’s moment has ended. What lies before us is a future filled with more life and light and hope than we can imagine.

He is not here...and that is good news. Why? Because he is already ahead of us. And, if we keep looking, we will see him. We will see him in the kindness of strangers and the renewed love of old friends. We will see him in words of gratitude and in acts of justice for all of God’s children. We will see him in the new life that is even now springing forth in places deadened by division and cut off by cruelty. If you don’t want to miss Easter, then walk faithfully into the new world that waits on the other side of this portal. Do not miss this resurrection moment when we can choose a different way of living in this world and loving one another.

Beloved, let us not be content to return to normal if normal is less than God intends for us. Let us be transformed by the inextinguishable force of hope, remade by the awesome power of love. Let us welcome a new day, a new world, a new life. Jesus Christ, our

Lord, is risen. He has come to us. He goes ahead of us. Let us run to meet him. Alleluia! Amen.

¹ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, p. 129