

Sermon for Easter Sunday 4 April 2021 @ 10:30 a.m. @ Bethesda UMC/Baltimore

Scriptures: Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-42 (UM 839); 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; John 20:1-18
(Mark 16:1-8 may be used instead)

“Varieties of Religious Experience”

For the first time I can remember, I am going to read Mark instead of John or one of the other Gospels on Easter.

(Read Mark 16:1-8).

“So 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.”

That’s it.

Most biblical scholars believe this is the oldest of the four gospels. Written about 30 or forty years after the crucifixion, it is the shortest, and probably the community it came from was under severe persecution and was even wiped out soon thereafter.

As one commentator points out, none of the four Gospels in our New Testament has an actual account of the Resurrection. Unlike some accounts written in the second century, which have strangers seeing the resurrection, all the accounts we have simply report stories of it told by believers ... affirming their faith, instead of documenting the event. Mark believes in the resurrection (9:9, 14:28), but Mark’s central focus is the Cross. That makes the Messiah the Messiah, and the Cross makes a disciple a disciple.

Think with me about this. Particularly in this year, when so much is lacking, so much is different, and so much is unclear, we are where the women at the empty tomb were. Going back into Mark’s story, it was a Roman soldier, not a disciple, who confessed faith at the cross. “Truly this man was God’s Son!” The women ... even though told by the young man beside the empty tomb to go and tell his disciples and Peter that “he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you,” were silent, “and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.”

I believe this is our Gospel for Easter 2021. Death has come, and cannot be denied. Not only the 500,000+ in our own country, with all the consequences we are still just beginning to assess, but all the deaths world-wide. Unlike the women, we argue and terrorize ourselves and one another with the gaping results of this pandemic ... but the point is the same. All the other huge occurrences of this year and more, the discussions on race we have never had before, the rage we watch among ourselves and even nature itself as we see more of how broken our seasons and seascapes have become by human invention and intervention... beneath all our noisy sharing is a great silence, a wonder, a stillness of custom and outlook all up and down our age levels.

What comes clear to me is the option, the opportunity, the reality of facing all this as our Christianity, when true to itself, does insist on, or else there is no hope, no help, no sense, no task to get to work on after "the curtain of the temple has been torn in twain."

As I understand it, the Jews thought of their temple as the center of the universe, where God dwelt. Within a few years of Jesus' death, and certainly within the lifetime of many who believed this, the exasperated, feuding Romans destroyed the temple and crucified thousands of Hebrew Jerusalemites, and that scenic curtain literally was torn apart forever ... giving Mark the image of what Jesus' death signified... a truly global artifact representing the universe's reinvention.

What we are facing, just as were the women, and the other disciples, and all who, like the centurion, were able to listen and think, and begin to build and connect with all the whole system around them ... what we are all offered, is the chance to see the whole universe differently than ever before ... to reach down and pick up a handful of dirt and see in it the possibility of life and food, not just for America, not just for our moment, but for the next generation and the next, as has been happening over and over throughout evolution.

We have just begun to come alive. We are together more than ever before. Death is real, and death has revealed life we haven't begun to imagine. Our grasp is real ... but so is our habit of selfish tribalism and all the wars of our immediate past

We have a lot to overcome ... and as far as religion goes, we have incredible sharing of insights ahead, if there is to be a planet earth, and cycle of life and death and new life and rebirth, ahead. The varieties of religious experience, as William James the philosopher called his famous reflection, are, for us Christians, the biggest challenge of all ... for we have misinterpreted Jesus' message to our own purposes for so long, many have lost hope for spiritual tradition and interrelatedness. The gift is here ... the silence and hesitation that still grip us can be the beginning, as it was for the first Christians, of a whole new outlook.

Let us pray that it may come alive, in and through us, in this generation, through these great signs and customs we are practicing this day.

In Jesus' name, amen.