

“Where We Go from Here”

April 1, 2018

Gifts of the Dark Wood series – Easter Sunday

Resurrection is the original “March Madness” and April Fool’s. Maybe you’ve been wowed by the upsets of the NCAA tournament - UMBC beating #1 Virginia in the men’s tournament or the Notre Dame women beating UConn at the buzzer - but the resurrection of Jesus is the most amazing upset ever. Just when we think it’s over, it’s not.

The Gospel of Mark puts us right in the middle of fear and hope. The Gospel uses urgent words like “immediately” and “at once.” Jesus moves from one place to another and from one situation to another quickly. Many times Jesus tells his followers not to say anything about who he is.

The account of resurrection in Mark is abrupt, too. We’re left wondering what else happened. I’m left wanting more. The women are seized with “terror and amazement” and say nothing because of fear. Is that it? We’ve seen the reactions to Jesus’ death and resurrection: either falling away like many of the disciples did when Jesus was being beaten and killed and then staying behind locked doors because of fear...or creeping back to the tomb like these women so they can care for Jesus’ body.

How do we respond? Where do we go from here? Even as we celebrate resurrection, the Good News that “He has risen! He is not here...” calls us to make a decision about how we live in light of resurrection. The call is to “go and tell,” and the women don’t. They are afraid. They had seen Jesus die on the cross. They came to the tomb in deep grief, determined to honor Jesus – perhaps wanting closure for the awful experience of watching his death. They had seen the stone rolled in front of the entrance to the tomb, and they were worried about how they would get it moved. All they wanted was to anoint Jesus’ body for a proper burial.

Instead, they hear, “He has risen. He is not here.” Fear overcame these women, as it might any of us. They were alarmed, amazed, afraid, astonished, trembling. Trying to remember all that Jesus had said. Can you imagine how overwhelming it was? All of the struggle that he endured, all he said about taking up the cross and following, all he said about losing your life to save it...that call to follow is still there, and it’s urgent!

Here's what's interesting: Jesus doesn't pick a new team of disciples. He keeps his promise to return to Galilee – even to those disciples who had deserted him. Their failures aren't enough to stop Jesus from loving them.

Eric Elnes uses Peter as a prime example. Peter's failures weren't a deal-breaker for Jesus. It even seems that Jesus was interested in someone who was willing to fail and struggle perhaps more than simply holding the right belief or doing the right action. Of course Jesus knew that faith isn't an easy, straight-away path, and yet it's difficult for us to embrace failure as a part of our journey. Failure can be a place where we know God's grace.

Certainly that happened for Peter. He became one who would be a leader. He saw a vision of God's inclusive love for both Jews and Gentiles. Peter is the one who would proclaim that God plays no favorites and offer the Good News that God seeks relationship with each of us - no matter what.

Peter knew the power of resurrection and new life. And he knew all too well that there has to be death for resurrection to happen. New life isn't new life if it doesn't come from the end of an old life.

So the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the foundation of our faith. The Christian church exists because of Jesus' resurrection. We claim and live into new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus' resurrection isn't an event locked in the vaults of history. It's as fresh and new and relevant for our lives today as it was in the beginning. The call to follow him is still there for us. When we believe in it and claim it for ourselves, then we share in resurrection power. We have Good News to "go and tell" because hope stronger than fear.

Fear of death does not have to rule the day. We can have true hope because God overcame the power of death and offers us the gift of new life in Jesus Christ. And the power of resurrection is real – I see it as we gather together. We are walking miracles of God – having overcome serious illness or battling illness with strength and boldness and with great hope even as we struggle with what's unknown and uncertain.

We believe in the power of prayer – and really practice it and offer it. Faith in God who brings healing really matters. We've endured hospital stays, surgeries and recovery, difficult family situations and the promise of God who walks with us is literally life-saving. We've gone through personal turmoil and are examples of God's power to bring hope when things seemed utterly hopeless. So, the power of

resurrection is very real, and it's right here among us! Don't stop looking for resurrection!

And don't keep it to yourself! Resurrection isn't a secret to keep to ourselves. The Christian community in the world is celebrating the promise of new life and resurrection and hope! What a message in a world where it seems so lacking! What a timely message when you and I know that people are hurting. What an urgent message we have to tell – that God cares, that God loves you no matter what, and that God desires relationship with you because of grace that we don't earn. Grace is the ultimate gift. Grace is what we celebrate in resurrection, and grace is available to all of us.

Grace is the touchstone of our faith – that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Death isn't the end. Mark tells us that the women who went to the tomb weren't ready for the news of resurrection. Maybe we don't feel ready either, but the truth is that resurrection happens! The women came with a goal to anoint Jesus' body and came away with instructions to spread Good News. It's urgent!

Do you hear the challenge? The women are thrown into a whole new resurrection reality, and so are we. Do you really believe it? Or are we more willing to believe in Good Friday rather than in Easter? So much of what we see, hear, and experience says that death is the final word, that there is no hope, that God doesn't care, that evil is more powerful than good, that there is no good news.

I pray that even if you come with those feelings today, you hear something else. Maybe, like the women, we stand in awe and wonder at what God does for us by God's grace. We stand in holy silence when we consider what it means that we don't have to live with a fear of death, what it means that God's love forgives, restores, and makes new.

But after the silence, we're called to share the message that we've heard. We're sent to "go and tell" how we know the power of resurrection. Hope is stronger than fear. Life conquers death. There is hope when all seems lost. God does care enough to come to us in Jesus Christ, live with us and among us, die for us, and offer eternal life. Evil will never overcome good. The Light of the World has come into the world, and the darkness has never been able to put it out. Christ is risen! Jesus is alive, and we are alive with hope. And we know people who need to hear the hope we have.

The women are called to go and tell others and to follow Jesus back to Galilee. We're called to follow Jesus – whatever our situation – whether we're alarmed and

afraid, or whether we're overjoyed. Right now in this sanctuary, all of those emotions are present.

But the words are God's challenge to us: "Go to Galilee and meet the risen Christ." Jesus didn't go to the Roman government to show them that he had risen from the dead. He didn't go to Pilate to prove what had happened. Jesus goes back to Galilee – to his closest friends who up and ran – and his presence with them invites us to realize something wonderful: however many times we've struggled to be faithful, however many times we've been silent when we should've praised God for something, however many times we've been drawn into thinking or doing evil, we are never beyond God's healing presence. Alleluia!

And so we're invited - all of us - to come with faith – whether it feels like enough to you, it's enough for God. Come to the table of grace and love that the risen Christ offers - to this simple meal that reminds us of his love sacrifice and our call to live with hope and joy in resurrection.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Thanks be to God. AMEN.

SONG OF INVITATION - Crown Him with Many Crowns (v. 1,2,4)

PRAYER OF CONFESSION & WORDS OF ASSURANCE