

Mark 16 Easter Sunrise Service
Boone UMC; April 5, 2015

God does his best work in the dark. I suspect that's why you've come this morning in the dark and cold, to see God, risen this day.

Just a few days ago, on Friday, the disciples deserted Jesus and fled when he most needed them. One followed at a distance. Peter warmed himself by a little fire, like the one we lit outside just now. But someone was on to him, and said hey, you were with Jesus. No I wasn't, Peter said. Then he moved somewhere else around the fire. She said again, for real, come on man, everybody can tell you have a Galilean accent. No I don't, Peter said, moving again. Then the crowd started to move in on Peter like they had on Jesus and said what do you think we're fools? We can tell you were one of them. Peter cusses and swears and insists he knows nothing of Jesus. Peter had never spoken another word. He truly did not know the man. Then the cock crowed. Jesus turned and looked at Peter. And he went and wept bitterly.

Then Sunday morning the disciples got in a boat and went out to fish, catching nothing. They've gone back to their old way of life before Jesus. When they come ashore they see Jesus. He won't leave em alone. He's made a little fire, like the one we just did. And he asks Peter, Simon, do you love me? Asks him three times. A fire, a three time confession. Jesus is undoing Peter's wrong, the way he undoes all of ours. And the little fire there is a sign, that all that's lost can be found and will be. Think of that every time you see a fire.

This morning we started with a fire and candles as a sign that Jesus is the light of the world. We sang against the dark and cold that Jesus is risen. And now we'll hear the scriptures' story of his rising. Notice what it says and doesn't. It doesn't tell us what the resurrection was like. "Then air entered his lungs, pink returned to his cheeks" none of that. In fact by the time this passage starts Jesus is already gone and the angel is waiting in the tomb like some sort of doctor's waiting room says ah, ladies, there you are, Jesus says to meet him back in Galilee in a few days, ok? Now, shoo, go tell the twelve. And they don't. They do nothing. They say nothing to no one for they are afraid. This is some triumph, some victory. Not a roaring sunrise but more like a little candle defying the darkness. Hear this word.

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. 2 And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. 3 They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" 4 When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. 5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 6 But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." 8 So they went out and fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

That's the word of God, it belongs to you, the Easter people of God, thanks be to God.

God does his best work in the dark. This contrasts a little with the prudish advice I got from a grandmotherly lady in college, 'Nothing good ever happens after midnight.' Ever? Well. When I was training for a marathon sometimes we'd get up before 3, we had lots of miles to get in before the day started (and we were slow). And when we were running some folks would be stumbling home. It was still yesterday for them. It was tomorrow for us. We were in the same geographic space but on different days. So too us Christians. We live alongside and love everyone. But we live on different days. For us the day of resurrection, Easter, has dawned. God is renewing the whole cosmos starting with the church. God will remake creation as glorious as it was meant to be. All will see. For now we live there—tomorrow. Others? Stumbling around? It's still yesterday.

I've taken some of y'all to a monastery in South Carolina called Mepkin Abbey. Trappist monks worship 7 times a day like the psalmist says to, 8 if you count communion, and the first is at 3:20 AM (makes it seem like we slept in, doesn't it?). A buddy of mine got out of worship once at 4 AM with some kids from a reform school he took with him. After chanting psalms in the dark for an hour he heard one kid say to another, "Man that was better than getting high." Sure enough, Jesus is intoxicating. At 3 AM it's dark and cold even in South Carolina and the monk in charge came to me. 'Your people don't have to go to everything,' he said. 'I can't get Catholic priests to come to this place and if they come they sure don't take parishioners and if they do they sure don't get up at 3 AM. What's up with you Methodists?' I said 'Hey, blame John Wesley, he thought we had a method for prayer, this Christian thing takes discipline, plus they drove a long way, they could have slept in at home.' I might have just said 'God does his best work in the dark.' Say it with me . . .

And that's good because we're in the dark most of the time. One of you took me aside, a faithful leader, and said this week you have trouble believing in God. Isn't that sort of basic to being a Christian, you asked? No, friend, most of us are in the dark most of the time, don't be afraid, that's where God does his best work. I think of folks in the darkness of pain for yourself or another—illness, depression, grief. Take heart, the dark is where God does his best work. I think of those at a crossroads who don't know what to do, left or right, stay or go, yes or no. Fear not, God does his best work in the dark.

In the gospel of Mark, the disciples are always clueless, always in the dark, every single time they get things wrong. Makes you wish for a broken clock, at least its right twice a day. Not the disciples. Not us. Except these women. They stayed with Jesus when the other disciples betrayed. They saw where he was buried. And here in the dark they scurry out first thing in the morning to anoint his body, as Jews are commanded to do for their loved ones. The body matters, so they courageously go to love and care for his body after others tore it apart. It's dark out and they're sorta in the dark—they hadn't thought of how to roll the stone away. This is like going on a trip and getting to the airport and saying, oh, right, guess I should have gotten tickets. It's a significant thing not to think about. But their love opened the door for them. They get there and an angel has done the work. They're in the dark, but in love, they do the right thing and God shows them the way. Friends, when you're in the dark, love, and God will show you the way.

The women are given a command. Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee, there you will see him as he promised you. *And they don't do it.* "Terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." Perhaps they can be forgiven. Seeing an empty tomb and an angel with news of resurrection before your first cup of coffee in the morning would probably have a similar effect on you. They're still in the dark. A direct command from an angel in an empty tomb and they flub it. They say nothing to no one because they're afraid. Do you ever wonder why God works through such unpromising material as you and me? I certainly do. God, isn't there a grownup around who can parent this child? Pastor this church? Do all this important stuff? No, God says, all I got is you. But hey, God made the universe out of dirt and new life out of a tomb, what can God do with you? With me?

This is where the gospel of Mark ends. "Terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." It's actually a little weirder in Greek. The last word is *gar*, translated for. "They said nothing to anyone, they were afraid, for . . .". And that's it. A whole book ends with a conjunction. In the middle of an incomplete sentence. Bad grammar. No other work of literature in ancient Greek ends with the word *gar*. Many bibles have longer endings of Mark added on. This is because ancient Christians couldn't bear to have it end that abruptly, with failure, the dark, an ungrammatical sentence. For . . . (what?). A student of the bible learned the whole gospel of Mark and delivered it as a monologue, a play, for packed audiences. The first time he did it he ended with the word "for." He felt its abruptness. So he said "Amen!" and the place erupted with applause. But he felt he'd betrayed the story so the next time he ended it with "for," held the pause, and walked off stage. No applause. Just befuddlement. Is that it? Did he forget the next line? Is he coming back? Is there more?

That's what the first readers of Mark must have wondered. Is that it? Isn't there more? For . . . ?

The story stops cold turkey like that to throw it into our laps. The ball is now in our court. For . . . what are we going to do about the empty tomb? The resurrection is an invitation to follow the risen Jesus. To preach his gospel. To love his poor. To have hope in the face of despair. To live in a way that shows resurrection every day. For . . . How will we carry on the story ended so abruptly in the bible and begun in our ordinary lives? Jesus is risen. He is going before you to Galilee. You will see him there. For . . .