

## **“A STRENUOUS BLESSING”**

Isaiah 25:6-9; Acts 10:34-43

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It was full dark still when the three women quietly closed the door of their lodging place and headed furtively into the night. They kept to back streets, walking close together, trying to make themselves invisible. Women at night on the city streets then, as now, were an easy target. So they moved through the shadows as quickly as possible without attracting attention. Finally, they broke free of the city and began the steep climb up the rocky hill beyond, where they would find the grave of their beloved one. Mark tells us that the first pale rays of the morning sun lightened the eastern sky as they arrived.

They had come to attend to Jesus' body, an act of both personal and religious devotion. They had come to cover the corpse with spices, to keep the stench of death away for just a little while longer. But when they arrived at the place, the stone had been rolled back. The body was gone. And a young man dressed all in white 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. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.” And then, Mark tells us, the women fled the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them. They ran, back down the hill, back through the city streets, back to their lodging place, where they locked themselves inside, trembling, and they said nothing to anyone for they were terrified.

Mark's account of the resurrection ends here. Just here. With three bewildered women, paralyzed by fear and indecision. Happy Easter! Are you feeling joyful yet? Preachers, by and large, avoid preaching from Mark's version of the Easter story because it is so spare, stark to the point of, well, probably realism about what might have happened that first Easter morning. The women had gone to the tomb expecting to find one thing: the dead body of Jesus. They went not only to grieve the passing of Jesus himself, but also the death of their hopes and dreams, the future he represented for them. It was a simple intention: sit with the corpse of their friend and their lives, hold at bay for one more day the inevitable decay of that which was gone forever. But the body was gone. God took it from them. God disappeared the last remnants of that old life from them, made it impossible for them to linger over it. Instead of what they had wanted and expected, God sent a messenger to meet them with a promise that was more challenge than comfort: He is not here. He is risen. Go, tell the disciples. Go, get thee to Galilee. And when you get there, you will find a new thing, a new life, a risen Christ unlike anything you have ever seen or thought or desired.

No wonder they huddled together in fear and indecision. Go. Do something. What is new is waiting for you. But they didn't want something new. They wanted what they had before, or at least to remain immobile, mourning its loss. And I would bet that they believed, or at least

wanted to believe, that if God were present in all this, it was God's job to make the old "before" come back, to restore to them their former beloved, their former life, their former dreams. But that was not what God offered them that morning. Nor is it the possibility that God holds out to us this Easter Day. No more "before." Easter is about moving from before to after.

How often in our lives do we divide our sense of the world into "before" and "after." We speak the words: That was before the divorce, before the death, before the job loss, before the diagnosis, before the drinking, before the arrest. Before life as we had known it and cherished it simply ended. Gone. Broken. Over. Sometimes by our own doing, and other times, because of circumstances over which we have no control. Goodbye old life. And we, like the women at the tomb, are cast into grief, and confusion, fear and the profound lethargy of facing the unknown. All we want in those moments is to undo what is so irrevocably done, to go back to what is familiar and loved, what makes sense to us. And when we search for God in the midst of that disorder, we want the same thing the women did. For God to restore the "before." God won't give it to us either. Maybe God can't. I don't know. I do know that God is wiser than we are wise. I do know that God did not save God's own beloved son from the cross. And I do know that the promise of God this Easter Sunday is not ever about the possibility of going back to what is gone; instead God promises us the possibility of going forward to something new.

But there's a catch here. This going forward, this possibility of new life, it's not something God can do alone. Yesterday afternoon, I came into this sanctuary and sat a while at the vigil. And while I was here, I found myself drawn into the image of the women back from the empty tomb huddled in their room. You know, this story could have had a very different ending. What if the women had turned their backs on the angel's proclamation? What if they had never told the other disciples what they had seen and heard? What if they had not gone to Galilee? God could raise the Christ, but it was up to the women to make the resurrection matter. The moving forward of God's great story of salvation depended on their finding the courage and faith to get up and go, and see, and do, and to embrace the new life the future offered.

And they did. We know the story moved forward from those first moments of doubt and inertia and fear. We know that the subsequent gospel writers wrote that movement forward into their gospels. And we know that when the women went to Galilee and met their Risen Lord, the new life that opened up before them was filled with joy and hard work, with challenges and rewards they could not have imagined before.

But Mark leaves the question of the women's response open, hanging; and he does that, I believe, for a reason. On one level, of course it matters what those first disciples decided. The stories of their deciding and the actions of all the faithful across time, they are our theological inheritance. These stories have the power to encourage, to prod, to strengthen our wobbly knees, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews puts it, and to make us braver than we want to be. But ultimately the question comes down to us: are we willing to accept this strenuous blessing which

is Easter joy? Are we willing to leave the empty tombs, all of the “befores” of our lives behind, and believe there can be new life, good life, better than we can imagine life in “after?” Can we find in ourselves the courage and faith to believe God’s promise ?

The choice is ours, a choice for each one of us to make, this Easter morning and every day beyond. Christ is risen! God has done God’s part, and in all surpassing mercy and love will continue at our side no matter what may come. That is the promise of the resurrection, a promise to which the faithful have testified in all generations. There is no power in heaven or on earth stronger than the power of God’s love. Nothing. So sing “Alleluia!” this morning; sing and dance if you will; and give thanks. Walk away from the empty tombs of your life and go. New life, unexpected life, abundant life will meet you on your way. So our God has shown us. Alleluia! Amen.