

Mark 16:1–8 (NRSV)

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. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. 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. 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.” 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.

The Serpent's Question

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: April 5, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Mark 16:1-8a

Saturday, Shabbat, the Sabbath. Never was there a harder day. The previous week began so hopefully. Jerusalem cheered the arrival of the Galilean preacher and his ragged band of followers. The Passover was upon them, the celebration of that day in Egypt when God's saving grace let death pass over the Israelites, and God sent them on the way to the Promised Land. The Gospel's say Jesus and his disciples shared the traditional meal of unleavened bread, in remembrance of that meal long ago in Egypt when the bread was made so quickly there was no time to let it rise before they fled to freedom. All week the signs seemed so auspicious.

But then cracks began to appear in the story they had told themselves, they who had followed Jesus so reassured. At the supper he spoke odd words about the bread and wine as his body and the blood of a covenant. He said that this was the last supper he would eat and that one of them would betray him and another deny him. And after supper in the garden he was grieved and anxious, pacing and praying and pleading with God. And then the mob came. A million things all happened at once. You know the story. [Slide 1] Arrest in Gethsemane, roughly hustled across the Kidron Valley into the city, hastily called questioning and trials, and all of them fleeing, all of them. And then in Rome's detached yet precise way the soldiers took him to Golgotha, and nailed his feet and strapped his wrists to the post. It was an ingenious form of torture, slow death, drawn-out agony and fatigue until the body slumped, the chest compressed and the lungs gave out. Then he was laid in a nearby rock-hewn tomb. All this finished just in time for the Sabbath. [Slide 2]

If you've ever seen Jerusalem on the Sabbath, you know its eerie silent emptiness. Nothing moves. [Slide 3] This day, a gift of reflection and rest, is a pause to be grateful for. But this Sabbath was torment. Racing images of the precipitous changes they had witnessed ran through their minds. Anger and shame mingled, anger that he wasn't who they wanted him to be, and shame that they had turned their backs on him in his darkest moment. The Sabbath was meant to be a breathing space, but this Sabbath took their breath away, twenty-four hours of relentless, inescapable solitude with demons chasing their thoughts.

The three women at least found the composure come Saturday evening to prepare for the belated duties of Sunday morning. The arrival of the Sabbath on Friday evening had meant that Jesus' body had not received the traditional anointing. The three women collected themselves enough to do what was needed. Saturday, after sunset broke the Sabbath, they bought spices.

And so they came on Sunday morning to anoint him, wondering with each other on the way how they would move the stone from the tomb. [Slide 4] But when they arrived, the stone had already been rolled away. [Slide 5] The entrance was open. Good fortune, they thought. But then they entered. And as if they hadn't already been tormented enough, there was a young man wearing a white robe in the tomb, but Jesus' body was missing. [Slide 6] Mark tells us they were alarmed. Of course they were. There were only a few explanations for what had happened, and none of them were good; the possible explanations all involved desecration. Desecration of the dead was the last straw.

The white-robed young man spoke to them and displayed a sure grasp of the obvious, “You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified ... he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him.” It’s uncertain if the three women heard the other part. Who could blame them if they didn’t? Who could blame them if they failed to take in the words “Do not be alarmed; ... He has been raised; ... go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee”? We don’t know what of this they took in. But we do know that they did not do what the young man told them to do. What we do know is that “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.”

What happened next? Well, at least this ending of Mark doesn’t tell us. But we know from the other Gospels and the rest of the New Testament that the women and the disciples did come to believe that Jesus had risen. Ultimately the story spread so far that this morning millions of people like us come to churches all over the world to hear the story and celebrate Easter morning.

But this beloved story of Easter morning, this story of the missing body of Jesus is apt to leave the modern reader with some of the same doubts Jesus’ first followers had, and maybe a few more. We’re perhaps even less persuaded by the supernatural than our ancient forbears. An atheist friend of mine once quipped, “How can you believe in a walking dead man?”

We have questions and doubts. Are there not reasonable explanations? Is it possible that someone, in fact, stole the body? The Gospels bend over backwards to show that it didn’t. But maybe that’s what did happen. Or maybe Jesus didn’t really die. Maybe he wasn’t mortally wounded, and he recovered from his wounds. These explanations make more sense. To say that he rose raises so many awkward questions. How does a dead body rise? How is that possible? Thomas had a hard time believing it. And what’s a risen body like? In the Gospels the risen Christ sometimes walks through locked doors. At other times his body seems quite solid; he shows his wounds and eats breakfast with his disciples. We have questions, which all boil down to, how could you explain anything like this? Like the women at the tomb, it seems that at best we can answer with alarm and fear, alarm and fear that something bad has happened, or worse, alarm and fear that reason itself has vanished.

I’ve been teaching my seminar on the writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer this spring, and I hope you appreciate the restraint I’ve shown until now. We’re in April, and I haven’t mentioned him all spring. But I can no longer curb the impulse. In his lectures on the first chapters of Genesis Bonhoeffer hits on a brilliant insight. He says that the serpent was the most cunning creature on earth because the serpent asked the question that sowed the seed of human doubt in God. The serpent says, “Did God really say you should not eat from every tree in the garden? Did God say you will die? You will not die.” It is meant to sound like an innocent, a pious question, a question meant to get at the truth, and give Adam and Eve good information. But of course it isn’t anything like that. It’s meant to take Adam and Eve down the path to ruin.

My friend who asked if I really believed in a walking dead man asked the same sort of question. He even qualified it by saying, “You’re a smart guy. How can you believe in a walking dead man?” The intent is obvious. It’s meant to sound like a call to reason, a call back from the brink of superstition. This is the serpent’s question of Easter. How is the resurrection possible? How did Jesus rise? Is his body solid or spiritual? Did God really raise him? You don’t really believe that Jesus rose, do you? You don’t really believe in a walking dead man, do you? They are the serpent’s questions. They are questions meant to sow seeds of doubt. They sow doubt by insisting that the only truth is the reasonable truth, the truth you can prove. That’s a lost cause

from the beginning, of course. One cannot prove the resurrection. To follow those questions is to go down a dead end street. They pose as pious questions. They pretend to search for truth, but the only version of truth they accept is one that faith can never provide. The phrasing of the questions rule the only answer we can give out of court. And they are also the serpent's questions because they distract us from the questions that belief in the resurrection truly raises for us.

The questions that truly face us this Easter morning are not how did this happen? How did Jesus get raised? Or even did Jesus rise? First, the answers to these questions can be arrived at as an article of faith. [Slide 7] The question is not how but who? Who is the risen Christ? The question is not how but where? Where do I encounter the risen Christ? The question is not how but what? What does the risen Christ mean to me? What does the risen Christ ask of me? What answer will I give to the risen Christ?

The Gospel of Mark even in its very concise ending gives us hints for beginning to answer these questions. The young man in the tomb tells the women to tell the disciples to go to Galilee where Jesus is going ahead of them. Galilee is the place from which most of the disciples came. It's where they first met Jesus. It's where they became his disciples. It's where they went with him as he gathered crowds on the hillsides and taught them. In other words, the disciples are to go home, to the place where their most important work has taken place, where they accompanied Jesus, and where they learned their craft. There he had been with them; and now there he would still be with them.

In a very real sense the disciples had been tempered by the fire of the Holy Spirit, just as John the Baptist had predicted. Jesus, he said, would baptize them with fire and the Holy Spirit. While Jesus was alive the disciples had been taught by him, but they were slow learners, often asking the serpent's question themselves. More often than not their goals and understandings were off-center. Never was that more obvious than in the events of the last week. Every single thing they had hoped for on Palm Sunday had by Thursday night vanished like a drifting smoke. The desire for victory, privilege, and recognition had come only to betrayal, denial, and death.

But now once they recovered from the shock, once they left the serpent's questions behind, they would finally be prepared to be with him more fully than when he was with them in the flesh. How would he be with them? Well, that's the serpent's question, isn't it? But who would be with them? That's the right question, isn't it? And the answer, of course, is the risen Christ. And where would they encounter the risen Christ? In sharing the bread and wine. In prayer. In the synagogue. In the scriptures. In preaching and teaching. And what would the risen Christ mean to them? Everything? What would the risen Christ ask of them? Everything. And what answer will they give the risen Christ? They will say anew, "Yes. Yes, I will follow you." Amen.