
Going Ahead

Mark 16:1-8

A Sermon preached in Duke Chapel on Easter Sunday, April 5, 2015, by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

On Friday, like J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, we said, "My Jesus, good night!" But early on Sunday morning, here we are saying, "My Jesus, good morning!" Jesus is not in the tomb and to make things even more intriguing almost all scholars assert that the Gospel of Mark ends with what we heard today—at verse 8, "... for they were afraid." Most of our Bibles contain two more endings, but they were most likely added later, perhaps centuries later, because none of the earliest manuscripts contain them. This is a strange way to end a resurrection story—"for they were afraid."

This can't be all there is, right? Unlike the other gospel accounts, there's no resurrection body. No reunion with the disciples. No commissioning of the disciples. No ascension. Mark emphasizes the suffering and death of Jesus and closes with a measly eight verses about the resurrection? He could have at least closed out his gospel sermon with three points and a poem. It is all very odd. The gospel is foolishness, according to the apostle Paul, and from the looks of those of us who are here, he may be right. And to make things even worse than an abrupt ending, is how it all ends—with fear.

The women who arrived at the tomb are told to "go, tell his disciples" that's he's been raised, but their response is "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." Silence and fear in the face of the resurrection. It would appear that the silence of Good Friday after Jesus' last breath becomes the silence of those who were afraid to speak.

But let's not be too hard on them for as one scholar says about this story, "if you're not afraid, you don't understand" (Brian Blount). Fear might actually be a sign that you are human. It's not everyday that you come across an empty tomb and emptiness, in general, can be frightening. And as for silence, it can be a constructive spiritual practice, which may be helpful for some Protestants. Protestants are part of the Word of God tradition, are logocentric, word-oriented, and words do matter but sometimes there are preachers who talk too much without saying anything at all. This is why Woody Allen proclaims, "God is silent. Now if only man would shut up." He's on to something perhaps and we do need to be silent at times and follow the proverb, "Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact" (George Eliot). There is a time to be silent.

But if fear shuts your throat, it can also be problematic. It may paralyze you and permit things to happen that should never happen. In *Silence*, a 1966 fiction novel by Japanese author Shusaku Endo, a Jesuit priest, Fr. Rodrigues, goes to seventeenth century Japan to support the local church and investigate reports that his mentor has committed apostasy. This is during the so-called time of "Hidden Christians" who had to practice their faith underground in fear of persecution. The novel details the trials of Christians at that time and the increasing difficulties of Rodrigues. Japanese security officials order suspected Christians to trample on a carved image of Christ called a *fumie*. If they refused, they would be imprisoned and killed. Rodrigues and his mentor are eventually captured. As the government tortures other Christians, the priests are forced to watch but they tell the priests that all they have to do is renounce their faith to end the suffering of their fellow Christians. Rodrigues struggles with this, particularly wondering if it is self-centered and unmerciful to refuse to recant when doing so will end another's suffering. He is torn. At the climactic moment, Rodrigues hears the moans of those who have recanted but are to remain in the pit until he tramples the image of Christ, the *fumie*.

At one point, Rodrigues stares at the *fumie*, and the carved image of Christ breaks his silence and exclaims: "Trample! Trample! I more than anyone know of the pain in your foot. Trample! It was to be

trampled on by men that I was born into this world. It was to share men's pain that I carried my cross." Rodrigues obeys, and the Christians are released. Rodrigues struggled with silence because he didn't want to renounce Christ but then Christ speaks up and says, "Trample me!" Jesus is always ahead of us, showing the way.

The carved image of Christ reveals that there comes a time when you have to break the silence. We don't have to always speak but as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "In the End, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends." We should break the silence because we have good news to declare—"He has been raised. He is not here," which is music to our hopeful Christian ears. Sometimes you want to hear what is spoken. Recently, on my birthday, my eight-year old son, Zachary, made a birthday card for me in which he wrote music to my ears, "Dear Daddy, you are the most holiest father." I think these white albs are working out for me. What he said may not be true but I like it.

When we have good news to share, we should "go and tell" and not let fear confine our discipleship making us ineffective witnesses to the resurrection hope of God. We may fear sounding like crazy Jesus freaks but there is a call to share our resurrection faith even in a more religiously pluralistic society that is postmodern, postcolonial, even post-Christian. We may not want to offend, but one is not condemning when one announces the resurrection of Jesus. One is heralding good news. It's an invitation toward life and hope and an open future from an empty grave.

The silence at the end of Mark is really a call for us to speak, to tell the story, to finish the story that began a long time ago. The call is to live out the resurrection, despite our fear. It may look like a botched ending but it's a literary open-ended call for us to begin where those at the tomb ended, to pick up where the women left off and to go and tell about the risen Savior, to speak into the silence and perform the gospel in the world. As one scholar argues, "the ending is performance" (Richard Ward) because the end of Mark is not really the end. Mark's ending is our beginning. Mark's resurrection story ends with us as we embody the resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. The story of the empty tomb continues through us as we speak into the void that was left behind. It calls us to a "readerly response" (Ched Myers).

Even more so the hope of the resurrection calls us to "historical insomnia" (Myers) in which we are made restless by the empty tomb, never forgetting Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and raised. A poem by Guatemalan exile Julia Esquivel captures this holy insomnia in which, to use her words, we are "threatened with resurrection" because,

*There is something here within us
which doesn't let us sleep, which doesn't let us rest,
which doesn't stop pounding deep inside...*

*in the very pupil of our eyes
which during sleep, though closed, keep watch
with each contraction of the heart
in every awakening....*

*To dream awake,
to keep watch asleep
to live while dying
and to already know oneself resurrected!*

This is what she calls "the marathon of Hope." Our role is to threaten others with hope instead of fear and to speak because how can we be silent when we see what's happening in our world like in Kenya?

We can't afford to be silent now but even if we are silent, that silence does not stop Jesus for the young man tells the women at the tomb—"[Jesus] is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you." Jesus doesn't need the women's approval to go ahead. He goes on without them to continue

his ministry. In fact, he was gone before they were told he was gone. He goes to Galilee just as he said (14:28). He's not sitting outside the empty tomb signing autographs. He's on the loose. He's on the move, like Willie Nelson, "On the Road Again." "He has been raised. He is not here." Jesus goes ahead with his ministry no matter what. He's always ahead of us because even when they went to the tomb "they saw that the stone...had already been rolled back." God is always ahead of us, not waiting for us, but acting on our behalf before we even realize we should be doing something or have need of anything. God is always ahead, always rolling back stones before we get there, preparing the way for us, threatening us with resurrection.

Jesus is going ahead to fulfill his ministry and mission in Galilee, the place where he began his ministry in Mark, the locus of his authoritative work. Jesus goes ahead to continue to proclaim the good news of God today. Jesus goes ahead to continue calling disciples, exorcizing unclean spirits, removing fevers, cleansing lepers, healing paralytics, healing withered hands, stilling storms, stopping women from bleeding to death, healing children, feeding thousands of people, and curing the deaf. The ministry of Jesus goes on with or without us!

Jesus isn't sitting at his church office desk surfing the web for his next best sermon on the mount but is actively working in the world. Jesus is going ahead of us and ever since he rose from the grave we've been trying to catch up with him. He's so quick that Mark's gospel is the only resurrection story in the Bible where Jesus never actually makes an appearance; he can't even be trapped in a text. I'm grateful that God's response to us is not based on our responses, our intellectual and physical limitations; God does what God wants to do. God resurrects Jesus without us signing on the dotted line to approve it. No consultation or asking our opinion.

The resurrection means that Jesus will always be ahead of us on everything and he's never stuck in the past because he's attune to the ministry needs of the present. We may get caught up in unproductive cycles of bureaucracy, church issues and disagreements over theology or social issues but Jesus is not waiting for us to get it together. He knows that if he did that, the church would have died a long time ago and he would still be in the grave. His resurrection is a revolution of our expectations as we joyously anticipate where Jesus is going. The resurrection is God's invitation to live in hope and "dream awake" as children of the resurrected Lord. The resurrection means that we don't have to remain dead because Jesus is alive.

And he's going ahead with his crucified and risen life and his going ahead is a call for us to move ahead and go ahead with him, to follow him wherever he leads, despite our fear, setting us free through his resurrection life in the Spirit to proclaim, "he has been raised; he is not here..." We're always catching up to Jesus but I'm glad he's leading the way and we don't call the shots.

Mae Jemison once told a story about a cowboy and a horse named Speedy. A cowboy was trying to find a fast horse. He needed to find the fastest horse he could because he needed to get from the East Coast to the West Coast immediately. So he went all over town, trying to find this horse. He finally heard about this horse named Speedy. He went directly to the farmer and said, "I understand you have the fastest horse in town." The farmer said, "Yup, that's right. Not only that, he's the fastest horse on the East Coast." The cowboy said, "I don't need to hear any more. Just give him to me. Let me give you some money." The farmer said, "Hold on. I can't sell you Speedy until I give you some instructions first." The cowboy said, "I don't need any instructions. I've been riding horses all my life." The farmer said, "Well, I can't sell you Speedy 'til I give you some instructions." The cowboy said, "All right. What are they?" The farmer said, "Speedy will not go 'til you say 'Praise the Lord.' " The cowboy said "fine," and started counting out the money. The farmer said, "Hold on. I have some more instructions." The cowboy said, "What are they?" The farmer said, "Speedy will not stop unless you say 'Amen. '" The cowboy said, "All right. Are there any more?" The farmer said, "No, that's it."

So the cowboy counted out the money, jumped on Speedy and said, "Giddy up. Let's go." Speedy didn't go anywhere. The cowboy kicked Speedy in the side. "Giddy up." Speedy just sat there. Finally, the cowboy remembered. He said, "Praise the Lord," and Speedy shot out like a bullet. Speedy was *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*. Speedy was going so fast, he ran over the Appalachian Mountains and the cowboy's ears popped. *Boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*. He tore up the Indiana corn fields, jumped over the Mississippi River, through the St. Louis Arch. Speedy was gone, *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*. Jumped over the Grand Canyon and tore up the Great Salt Lake - not necessarily in that order. Came up and over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, looked at Lake Tahoe. The cowboy looked out and saw the Pacific Ocean shining clearly, and Speedy was still going *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*. They came up to a cliff. But Speedy was not stopping. The cowboy started getting nervous. He started saying, "Whoa, Speedy, slow down." Speedy was still going *boogedy, boogedy, boogedy*. They were almost at the cliff, and the cowboy was pulling on the reins, but Speedy wouldn't stop. They were at the cliff, and the cowboy remembered. He said, "Amen." Speedy stopped on a dime. Right at the edge of the cliff, with hooves barely holding on. The cowboy was real happy because he had made it from the East Coast to the West Coast in two hours. He was so happy, in fact, that he reared back, grinning from ear to ear, and said, "Praise the Lord!"

Aren't you glad that we don't call the shots? Know what you are getting into as a disciple of Jesus. He will not lead you off a cliff nor will he follow your instructions. He's an uncontrollable, living, loving resurrected God, and he will take you on a spiritual adventure of the unknown to go where he goes in Galilee, North Carolina. Are you ready? Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Praise the Lord!