

The Resurrection of Our Lord

Col. 3: 1-4

Mark 16: 1-8

+In the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen+

Let us begin this homiletical enterprise with a set of riddles; 1. What has a head and a tail, is brown but not legs? (a penny). 2. I am fatherless and motherless entering the world without sin; roaring when entering the world, I never speak again. (Thunder). But now to more serious ponderings--when is a conclusion to a story not the finale? When is a locked door really a hidden opening? Or, to ask it in the most terse and direct way, "**When is an ending NOT an ending?**" Is it perhaps at those moments when in life we think there is nothing left that CAN be done or said, given or received; when we are utterly empty handed and without power, that we can suddenly be surprised and startled in unexpected new beginnings? "**When is an ending NOT an ending?**" Today it is when disciples who have denied their Master and run off are sent out to tell a broken world that sin (even their own) is not the closing word about life. It is when a crushing loss can no longer claim the upper hand and blot out hope. It is when we discover that we have spent energy looking in the wrong place (the tombs of our own lost efforts) only to be given new possibilities. It is when a man who should be dead is raised and alters the whole of the future. It is when a Gospel stops dead in midsentence on a preposition, and then beckons us to enter the drama and participate in it. This is the story of Easter; The tale of a painful and dream robbing death, the saga of people who believe the direction of their lives has hit a dead end, and the narrative of the God who makes all things new, BUT not in a way anyone anticipated. This is about endings that are transformed by surprises. As W. H. Auden, the English writer observed, "Nothing that is POSSIBLE, (that is anticipated) can save us". It is only the improbable that can.

So today in St. Mark's Gospel we get the most basic story of the Resurrection. Many of the aspects are puzzling. The women come to anoint a body that is already 3 days dead which Joseph of Arimathea has already given burial. They wonder about a stone too large for them to maneuver only after they are on their way. And the text ends on the word "for" (gar in Greek) so that we are left hanging on the simplest proclamation—He is Risen, which may be just what Mark intended anyway.

But one aspect of this telling should be no mystery. It is the statement that those women were afraid! Do any of us really wonder at this? They were dealing with death and then amazingly life where it was not supposed to be. What strikes at our hearts, bodies, and souls when we, too, are dealing with such close companions as living and dying?

Several years ago our family went to Fort Fisher for a week's break. Our habit was to walk up and then down the beach for a mile or two and this day was no different at first. On that stroll we passed 2 young girls playing in the sand; one about 6 years old and the other 10 or 11. They were doubtless sisters, judging from their appearance, and the torment they put on each other! Their laughter was playful and infectious. But coming back down the beach, moments later, the voice of the older girl rang out calling, "Rachel, Rachel where are you?" Each time she called the energy changed. Her voice echoed annoyance, and then anxiety, and then fear, and finally out and out terror. By the time we arrived on the scene as the only adults, she was doing the obvious; looking out into the waves and tide and finding no trace of her sister. Just as we were about to ask about her parents out pops Rachel from her hiding place under the small, private boardwalk where she had been cloistered. The older girl's hair was red—and so was her temperament. She began to shake and then screamed at the other—"Don't you ever do that again! You scared me to death."

The little one with eyes frozen open did not say a word. Then with shocking suddenness the older girl began to weep, and with tears washing at the sand on her face she put her arms around her little sister and rocked. Two closely related experiences occurred in an instance. The first was that a sense of mortality visited the older girl, and the second was the realization that she had something, or rather someone, very precious and valuable to her and she did not want to lose that. In that experience we can hear the 2 poles of Easter—the ending we fear-death, and the beginning God gives which is marked by joy.

The first of those is something we generally keep quiet and speak of in whispers, yet Good Friday holds it up for all of us to see—the power and impact of death. These women go to a tomb, the place of an ending, and they ask, “Who will roll away the stone from the door for us?” It really is the eternal question is it not? We do not ask it in the same terms, but in our own grief or fear when a friend, child, spouse, or parent dies we give voice to the same mystery in other phrases—“What will I do now?”, “How will we go on?”, “Can my life ever regain its former joyfulness in light of this loss?”, or “I wonder where God is this time?”. Or as the young girl at the beach asked—“Rachel, where are you?” It is not hard to hear the sense of helplessness and hopelessness in the questions of these women or in our own. The mystery of endings has plagued us all.

That is, however, only one side of the story. Easter is the narrative written, not by sin, death, or our fears, but by God. Easter is a reminder to all of us that some endings become a beginning—they lead to places we do not have the potential to create for ourselves, but we can only receive them as a gift, and once discovered and realized that gift changes the way we see life and death. Notice that the Gospel of Mark has no resurrection appearances. There is no attempt to provide a proof for what has happened, and even the empty tomb is not used in that way here. Instead you and I stand in exactly the same place as those first disciples—we are merely addressed by the words, “You seek Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified; he is not here, He Is Risen”. In other words—“You expect death, but death does not reign now”. “You expect the possible, but the improbable is what you will get”. The ending is not now the end. And what makes this Good News is not just what is said, but WHO it is that says it. It is our trustworthiness of God that makes the message worthy of our hearing. This message brings a dramatic end to the ending that looked like a disaster of abandonment and death. Instead the tragedy is turned on its head. As St. John Chrysostom wrote, “Hell took a body, and discovered God. Hell took a body, and discovered God. It took earth, and encountered Heaven. It took what it saw, and was overcome by what it did not see.”

And what does this do for us, who 21 centuries later hear the words, He is Risen? It places our lives in a new setting—a new situation. It anchors us with hope. Murdo Ewen MacDonald, a prisoner of war in Germany and chaplain to American soldiers, told how he learned of the Normandy invasion. Early on D-Day, he was awakened and told that a Scotsman in the British prisoner-of-war camp wanted to see him. MacDonald ran to the barbed wire that separated the two camps. The Scot, who was in touch with the BBC by underground radio, spoke two words in Gaelic (said tar eis teacht), meaning "They have come." MacDonald ran back to the American camp and spread the news: "They have come . . . They have come." And everyone knew the allied troops had landed at Normandy. The reaction was incredible. Men jumped and shouted, hugged each other, even rolled on the ground. Outwardly they were still captives, but inwardly they were free. The ending that threatened them was no longer the end that would control their destiny. That's the hope that Easter brings. When is an ending not an ending? today! Amen+