

April 4, 2021

Mark 16: 1-8

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“In the End Is the Beginning”

Those who study human nature say there is a built-in reaction when we are challenged. This automatic response is deeply ingrained in our bodies and brains. It's called “Fight-or-Flight.” I did some research and found an interesting article from Harvard Medical School. When something threatens us, and this can be anything from a physical threat to something like a work deadline or a verbal conflict, there is an automatic response that involves hormones, vital organ functions, and our psyches. The stress makes our breathing faster, our hearts pound, our muscles tense, and sweat may appear on our foreheads. The fight-or-flight mechanism kicks in because our deepest concern is survival. We're wired to protect ourselves, and when that is on the line, whether we're in a traffic jam, facing family troubles, or something more serious like loss or grief, we either rise up to face it head on or put as much distance as possible between us and whatever threatens us. Fight or flight. At the root of this reaction is fear. I'm talking about any and all fear; fear that makes us jump in the dark or fear that can shake us to the core. We can't help it. It's who we are, and our bible reading today makes clear that even on Easter we must acknowledge how our fear threatens to cancel out the great thing God has done.

We've read from the end of Mark's Gospel. It's the first day of the week and the women are at the tomb. A messenger tells them Jesus is not there. He has risen and will be with them in Galilee. We're told they leave the grave saying nothing to anyone because they are afraid. Our worship gathers us in-person and online to celebrate in joy. Spring flowers, songs of hope, and even the bright sunshine of the morning remind us that God is a God of life. But there's no guarantee Easter Day makes a difference. The gospel knows how fragile our faith can be. Death is real. Our fear of the unknown is just beneath the surface. Will we fight the good news that Christ is risen? Will we challenge it because we can't fully trust something we don't understand? Will we run from it, keeping the message of resurrected life far from the routine ways we go about our lives every day? Will fear keep its grip on us? Or, will we follow Jesus? He calls us to pick up our cross and follow him, and I think this is his way of saying that even through great suffering and death, we have nothing to fear. We've heard the end of Mark's Gospel today but the power of Easter is how the story continues to be written in our lives.

I've been aware of how often my family's experience of the recent death of my father keeps flooding back into my thoughts these days. My dad died last October, at the end of a long battle with Parkinson's Disease. That his last months were in the midst of a pandemic made it especially difficult, and I know many of your families have experienced similar struggles over the past year. On the day he died, I was already on the road to see him. It was a planned visit and I got the call on my cell phone as I was driving that the time was near. Pushing the speed limit as much as I dared, I arrived at the nursing facility where he was and entered the main doors. Face masks were required. Checking in at a medical station was the protocol because the virus was still a threat to the senior population of that place. Even though I couldn't see the full faces of the nursing personnel as they checked me in, I could tell from their eyes that my dad had died. Immediately, I felt my breath and heart quicken. It was automatic. My body tightened and on the way to his room it was like walking in a fog. My mother was there and I knew without words being spoken that the end had come. I share this story not for sympathy but because I know many of you have experienced similar feelings. To realize a loved one has died is to experience a deep sense of loss. It's not exactly like being at the garden tomb where the stone was rolled away, but there is an emptiness and even a darkness there, and the wondering, “What are we going to do now?” All of this is real but so is what I experienced next, as I stood by my dad's bedside. I was not afraid. In fact, there was a calm that came from the assurance that this one I loved was with God. Faith prepares us for these experiences. In that moment (the Apostle Paul says it happens “in an instant, in the twinkling of an eye, 1 Cor. 15:52) my dad was raised up to be with God. More than that, God was with us in that room, too, and because my dad was with God and God was with us, none of us were separated from each other. This is something far greater than just what earth or a physical body can convey. Christ had come to meet us that day and we knew, even through our sadness, that all would be well.

The message to the women on that first Easter was that they were to go to Galilee. That the risen Jesus would meet them there just as he had said. This is the difference Easter makes in us. Our response to death is more than just the anxiety and fear that automatically wants to take control of us. Fight or flight isn't the only way. The way Jesus shows us is the way of faith. And so, where is Galilee for us? Our Galilees are where we live our lives. The living Lord would meet up with the early followers in Galilee and that's where a resurrected Jesus meets us, in our lives, every day and in every way. Jesus is there, embracing us with love and grace, especially when we are rattled or struggling. I'm glad we're connected through worship today, in the sanctuary or by way of technology. But it's in our lives that we meet Jesus. When we're in the midst of a family situation; when we are facing a serious health concern or when we are trying to find our way. When we seek comfort with the news of another shooting, or when we're discouraged with another story of systemic hate and even when we face the finality of death - especially

when death takes hold of us - Jesus meets us there and reminds us that in the end God's new beginning is about to happen.

I was recently reminded of the writings of one of my long-time favorite spiritual writers, Frederick Buechner. Lots of words have been written about Easter but perhaps there are none quite as poignant and as powerful as Buechner's timeless quote when he writes, "Resurrection means that the worst thing is not the last thing." Church, can we hear that? Can we trust that in the "Galilee" places where we live God transforms the end into a new beginning? If you remember nothing else from our Easter worship today, remember this. Fear is not the only way. In fact, fear is not the way at all. For us, the way is Christ. Ours is the way of faith because God will not allow death to have the final word. Easter gives us a powerful message and that's why we say, "He is risen!" We will not be afraid or silent. We will proclaim the good news that "because he lives we will live also." May it be so. Now and forever. Amen.