

Look Up!

Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024

Mark 16:1-8

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Fred Craddock, one of the great preachers and teachers of preaching in the 20th century, was fond of telling the story of one church's Easter celebrations. This church took great pride in its Easter Sunday worship, which always included an elaborate display of 500 Easter lilies. Some years the lilies were arranged in a gigantic cross shape, other years they were banked on the steps of the chancel, while other times they were placed decoratively around the sanctuary. For 15 years, the church had blanketed their sanctuary with incredible displays. Every year, 500 lilies.

The plants were memorials. Church members paid \$5 per lily, and every year the bulletin would list 500 names of members who had donated to the Easter lily fund. Five hundred lilies. Five bucks a plant. They were beautiful.

But, as Craddock says, on the 16th year of the tradition it all fell apart. That year, one of the church members, a dear saint of the church, went up to the gigantic lily cross and announced to no one in particular, "I am going to visit my friend who is in the hospital. Perhaps I could take one of these lilies to her? I know that I can't tell which one I bought for \$5, but since they all look alike, I'll just take one from the corner. I know she'll be delighted. That shouldn't be a problem, should it?"

The woman was not one to wait around for an answer. Without securing anyone's permission, she walked up to the cross of 500 lilies and gently lifted one up to her nose. But then her expression changed. Her eyes grew wide, her face filled with a mixture of surprise, disbelief and outrage. Holding up the Easter lily, she turned around and faced those who were still in the sanctuary. "They're fake!" she cried. "They're all plastic!"

The entire church erupted in a panic. If the lilies were not real, then what could be trusted? Was it possible that for 15 years someone had been tricking them into believing these 500 plants were not real? Someone did the math: 500 Easter lilies at \$5 each, times 15 years equals \$37,500.

The whole episode made them look up and see Easter entirely differently.

Well, as church panics go, the church board authorized an investigation and formed a committee to look into the matter. Eventually the pastor fessed up: indeed, the church

had been using the same plants, year after year. Each year the custodian carefully removed all 500 plants, covered them and stored them in a safe place.

And the money? Well, the pastor said, it had been used for mission projects and scholarships. “Besides, he said...plastic lilies are the perfect Easter symbol...they never die!”

That Easter Sunday, the church looked up—and was never the same.

Easter traditions—the flowers, the music, the cute outfits, the baskets filled with candy and Grandma’s Lamb cake are all part of a well-oiled machine. And we do not like it very much if any part of that machine is changed. If you don’t believe that, then I challenge you to recommend swapping out “Jesus Christ is Risen Today” for another Easter hymn.

Easter is supposed to follow a certain path.

That is in the back of our minds this morning as we hear Mark’s rather surprising Easter sermon. To its credit, it is short, and certainly begins the way we have come to expect. We hear the familiar refrain of the women headed to Jesus’ tomb early in the morning, carrying their grief and sadness along with spices to anoint his body.

So far, it’s just what we expect. Upon arriving at the tomb, Mark tells us, “they looked up, (and) saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back.” Again, none of this is surprising. After all, we know where this story is headed. Jesus is not here; he has been raised.

That is the message which gets us out of bed on Easter: he is not here. That is the message we treasure, that anchors our faith and gives us our ultimate hope. This is what we have come to expect from Easter.

What we do not expect, however, is that despite the angel’s reassurance, the women are not filled with joy. Instead, shock and fear reverberate through them. Mark tells us they run away from the tomb, fearful, and silent. They refuse to say anything to anyone, like a group of eighth grade boys caught cheating on a test...Mark says, literally, “They said nothing to nobody.” The gospel does not end in resurrection, but in fear.

In the other Gospels accounts, there are at least two pieces of evidence presented in support of that message: exhibit “A” is the empty tomb, and exhibit “B” is Jesus himself. Jesus appears to the women, and then to the twelve, just as he said.

In Matthew, Jesus' appearance is welcomed with joy. In Luke, Jesus' appearance to two disciples walking away from Jerusalem causes their hearts to burn with joy. In John, he comforts Mary in her crying.

Mark has none of that. His ending is abrupt and shocking: they said nothing to nobody.

It may not be the message we expect, but perhaps that is the message we need. Our lives have become clouded by layers of trauma, and in recent years we have come to understand just how trauma impacts our lives. Trauma becomes a tomb that silences us in our fears...we tell nothing to nobody.

Trauma, I believe, is what led countless veterans of war to return home, never to speak of what they experienced. Many of us whose fathers and grandfathers and great-grandfathers served in World War II know this. I have a box of photos and memorabilia my dad brought home from World War II. I have no stories associated with those pictures, and to the best of my knowledge, neither did my brother, my sister, or even our mother. Trauma leads us to tell nothing to nobody.

In this sense, Mary's abrupt ending offers us the hope we need. Jesus is not here, but has gone back to Galilee. Galilee: the place where he healed and taught. Galilee: the place where the disciples were called, where sins were forgiven. The women look up to hear the promise that Jesus is not there—that is has gone ahead of them.

If the dead don't stay dead, then what else can happen? In their trauma and pain, the only assurance the women find is that Jesus has gone ahead of them. In their trauma, they soon discovered a deeper hope. Jesus is absent, but he has not abandoned them. He is on the loose. He'll meet them in Galilee—the very place where he had he loved, laughed, and lived.

Our friend Shari Maddux has shared with me a little book about a church that discovered new possibilities. They exchanged saying "if only" by asking, "what if?" Instead of saying, "if only we had this...if only we had more of that..." and began asking, "What if?" It is a question that holds resurrection possibilities for all of our lives, not just church.

"If only" becomes "What if?" as you and I hear this call to go and to follow, realizing that there is no place we can go that Jesus has not already been. He is risen! He is risen indeed! *Amen.*