

“Bear Witness – Even in Fear”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday – April 5, 2015

Mark 16: 1-8

The Season of Lent had a different feel for me and for many of us at John Knox this year. That’s because over the span of 23 days, we had four funeral services here in the sanctuary. It’s not uncommon for us to have that many funerals in the span of 4-6 weeks. And it’s not uncommon for us to have a couple of funerals in the sanctuary soon after one another. It is uncommon to have that many in that short a period of time. And it was very unusual – yet wonderful – to have all four funerals in this space of worship. I have to admit, that after three successive Saturdays of funerals here at the church, I didn’t quite know what to do with myself on the Saturday following the final one.

In these funerals, we celebrated the lives of husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, sons and daughters. Two of the funerals were for long-time members of John Knox. One was for a past member of John Knox, and who was the sibling of a current member. And one was for the husband, father, and son-in-law of current members of our church. All four were baptized children of God, who in some particular way spread the light of Christ and illuminated our paths of discipleship.

One of the things that physically became a part of these 23 days was the changing of the paraments. You may not know that word – it’s a church word, so if you use it in conversation at work or school you’ll probably get a weird look. It’s what we call the pulpit scarf and cloth on the communion table, and we use different colors for different seasons in the church’s calendar. The Season of Lent is purple, while today we have white for Easter. We also use white whenever we have a funeral in the sanctuary. So, for 23 days, we were changing the cloths – purple to white, white to purple, and so on.

In some ways, that physical action of changing the colors of the paraments spoke to me in the midst of these funerals in Lent. Lent can feel solemn and stoic, as we examine ourselves in preparation for Easter. It felt even darker as we were saying goodbye to so many faithful loved ones over the course of three weeks. And yet, each time I changed these cloths from purple to white, it reminded me of today. It reminded me that Easter was coming. It reminded me that in the midst of our grief, our uncertainty, our loss – God’s hope and love will ultimately have the final word. Even in our darkest times, the light of resurrection will ultimately shine forth.

Of course, reading Mark's account of Easter morning can make you wonder if the gospel writer forgot about hope and joy on this momentous day. Compared to his other colleagues, Mark would be considered the Twitter version of the gospels: keep it short, sweet, and under 140 characters. He tells the story of Jesus with brevity and efficiency, and his focus has always been on the journey to Jerusalem and the cross. He spends 119 verses on Jesus' passion and death, and 8 verses on his resurrection. To be sure, it is the most jolting and unnerving of the four gospel accounts of Easter morning.

And yet, as we discussed in our Bible Study on Tuesday, all four gospels have something to contribute to our understanding of this day as Christians, and Mark is no less important. As with all the other gospel accounts of Easter, it is the women who first receive the news that Jesus has been raised. In Mark, we read that "Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint (Jesus)" (16:1). As they went to the tomb, though, we can tell that anxiety and concern are present with the women: "They had been saying to one another, 'Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?'" (16:3). They were filled with uncertainty as they approached the final resting place of their Lord.

Their uncertainty turned to shock when they reached the tomb. The very large stone had already been rolled away, and the tomb was open. They hesitantly went inside the tomb, and what they found was even more alarming: "They saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed" (16:5). I can only begin to imagine what must have been going through the three women's minds at that point. "Where was Jesus? Had someone stolen the body? Who was this man sitting inside the tomb? Had he rolled the stone away? What's going on here?"

If the other gospels share the joy and happiness about Easter, Mark shares the stark, genuine, human emotions in response to this new reality. Mark doesn't sugar-coat it - it is natural for us to respond to the resurrection with fear, with shock, with uncertainty, with doubt, with alarm. We struggle, as the women did, to comprehend what is happening. We need explanations, visual aids, logic - anything to help us make right what seems to be totally out of place. If the body is not here, then where is it? What does that mean? This day can actually be quite terrifying.

Yet even in our fear, our shock, our anxiety, God does not abandon us. God's messenger knows the women are alarmed, even without them saying a word. And so he assuages their fears by: first, acknowledging their fear: "Do not be alarmed;" second, recognizing why they have come: "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified;" third, explaining why he is not there: "He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him;" and finally, giving them direction out of their fear: "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" (16:6-7).

Of course, the women still struggle with all of this, and the verbs and adjectives used by Mark reflect this struggle. The women “fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid” (16:8). I would argue that the church struggled with this way of ending Mark’s Easter account. If you look in your bibles, you will find a shorter and longer ending to Mark, likely written some three hundred years after the original ending at verse 8. I’m sure others felt like the culmination of the Christian faith could not end with, “and they were afraid.”

Martha Spong is a UCC pastor, and she writes the following: *Stopping at verse 8 leaves us all in an uncomfortable situation. We crave the resolution the additional verses bring. It’s a day when we really want to offer a few “Alleluias” and “He is risens” and let the trumpets and the choir take care of the rest . . . [Mark’s account] leaves us mostly with questions. Why preach it? I chose to because I find the discomfort compelling . . .*

With their horror and bereavement still fresh, (the women) hear the kind of news we might fantasize about getting after a loved one dies – and they were afraid. Their fear reminds us that the good news of Christ’s resurrection is not simply reliable news to be taken for granted. It is a truth so shocking that even the first people to hear it, people who hear it on the spot where it happened, cannot imagine how to tell anyone else . . .

Their story allows us to stand in their place, with our doubts and our questions and even our hopes. It offers an opportunity to talk about our own disbelief without rushing straight to the celebration. It reminds us that even when it’s hard to believe, there is no good news unless someone shares it (*Christian Century*, April 1, 2015: 18).

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We may have read in Mark that the women “said nothing to anyone,” but obviously, the good news was shared. Otherwise, we would not be here today. But that doesn’t minimize how the women were seized with shock and amazement by the sight of the empty tomb. How do we share the good news of this day, even when it’s hard to believe? How do we bear witness as disciples of the risen Christ, even in our fear?

For each of the four funerals that took place during Lent, the top of the bulletin read: “A Service of Witness to the Resurrection.” That is our statement of faith at the time of someone’s death that even in our grief, our pain, our shock, and our fear – God has conquered death through the empty tomb. We bear witness to this good news every time we gather at the time of death and reaffirm that “nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Even in our fear, we are witnesses to this good news.

There is much to be afraid of in our modern world: crime, poverty, things that make us different than our neighbor. It would likely be the prudent thing to keep this facility locked all the time, and not seek to invite those who live right around us to be a part of this open, caring, community.

And yet, this church continually seeks to find ways to be welcoming and open to our neighbors, whoever they may be. That is why a group of individuals are sending hand-written cards to people who have recently moved within a mile of the church, inviting them to be a part of what's happening here. Who knows – some of you may be here today because of those cards? There is no good news unless someone shares it. Even in our uncertainty, we are witnesses to this good news.

Our church has experienced a lot of changes over the last five years. Change can cause excitement and hope; change can also cause anxiety and fear. I've sensed that; Lisa has sensed that; the Session, the governing board of John Knox, has sensed that. The healthiest way to address that range of emotions is to talk with one another, to listen to one another, and to discern God's voice in each of our individual voices. That is why, later this month, we will be talking and listening to one another through Listening Sessions. In so doing, we are able to celebrate what God is doing here, and look to the future with hope and anticipation, even if at times we are seized with terror and amazement, like the women at the empty tomb.

Today you can sign-up for these Listening Sessions that begin on April 16. All members and friends of John Knox received a letter this week outlining this process in partnership with Whitewater Valley Presbytery, and if you didn't get a letter, extra copies are available on the table with the sign-up sheet in the main hallway. If you think your voice doesn't matter, think again. If you don't believe you have anything new to add, think again. Come, and participate in these opportunities to share your perspective on how the good news has, is, and shall continue to be shared at John Knox Presbyterian Church. Even when we are uncomfortable or uncertain, we are witnesses to this good news.

At the end of the funeral service, we will say the following as part of the commendation and blessing: "O God, You only are immortal, the creator and maker of all. We are mortal, formed of the earth, and to earth shall we return. This you ordained when you created us, saying, 'You are dust, and to dust you shall return.' All of us go down to the dust; yet even at the grave we make our song: Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia!"

Bear witness – even in fear. Bear witness – even in uncertainty. Bear witness – even in doubt. Bear witness, go, and tell others the good news: the tomb is empty, death has been conquered, and the world will never be the same again.

Alleluia! Amen.