



## Out of Despair, Hope; Out of Death, New Life

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Ledlie I. Laughlin  
Easter Sunday ~ April 12, 2009*

Mark 16:1-8

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 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." So 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. And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.

It was a nice little road to drive on, as are so many dirt roads in Vermont, coming down from my grandfather's farm. I knew it well, and enjoyed taking the turns faster than advisable, much faster than the speed limit. The turn this time was too sharp; my rear tires skidded wide; I turned back overcompensating. I don't know which part of the car hit what first, only that I was thrown on to the floor on the passenger's side, as the car somersaulted head-over-heels and came to an abrupt stop right side up having landed in the brook ten feet below the bank of the road. The next morning when the tow truck pulled my mother's beautiful recently repainted 1962 Volvo out of the brook, we found blue paint marks as high as nine feet up on a tree. I walked away without a scratch. My mother's car was totaled. I was eighteen and haven't been in an accident since. But I remember well the sickening feeling of being in something too big moving too fast spinning skidding suddenly irretrievably out of control.

Anxiety is defined as: "Apprehension, tension or uneasiness that stems from the anticipation of a danger, whose source is largely unknown. An unpleasant state of mental uneasiness or concern about some uncertain event; a state of restlessness and agitation, often accompanied by a distressing sense of oppression or tightness in the stomach."

The level of anxiety in our society today is palpable, things skidding out of control. Even if our own employment is secure, great swaths of the work sector are being laid off, from laborers to litigators; all the graduating students about to enter the work force with dim prospects, competing with seniors who are hanging on to - or returning to - work because their retirement savings have disappeared. We're living in one of the more affluent, better-educated neighborhoods in the richest nation in the world, and we know - even if remotely - that this economic crisis is far, far worse for the poor and the already destitute in this country and around the globe.

The source of our anxiety is clear; we have been stripped of our sense of security. Some significant parameters and constructs of our lives have shifted, suddenly and unexpectedly; things we took as given have now been taken. We are confronted by the realization that we're not really in control of as much as we hoped, believed, or

otherwise deluded ourselves into thinking. What began as an economic crisis, has the seeds, the potential, of becoming a crisis of imagination, a crisis of possibility, a crisis of faith.

How do we respond? I see three steps. The first: To break our problems down into manageable size bites and regain a sense of control. Apply Reinhold Niebuhr's wise prayer: "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Recognizing that I cannot control all of it, I can at least manage this portion – make adjustments, change my spending, take these steps for future security, and so on.

The second: Be intentional about creating a little space in our lives to be calm, silent, be focused; remember to breathe. Meditation, prayer, a nice walk; these are essential.

This leads to a third: I am awakening – as perhaps you are too – to something known but easily forgotten: that there's only so much security to be achieved through trust in our economic constructs – personal, national, or global. I see that I, that we, have once again grown too dependent on elements of life that are not lasting. Perhaps we have had too many eggs in one basket, too many eggs in the wrong basket.

There are kingdoms, commonwealths, and nations of our own building and achievement. And then there is the Kingdom of God. While we busy ourselves trying to shore up the walls of the one, might we not envision what it would be to inhabit the other. I am not suggesting that losing our savings or our job is in any way a result of trusting too much in our savings or job; obviously, these are critical to our survival and well-being. I am suggesting that as we now struggle and make sense of these losses, we may find our focus shifting, our trust placed elsewhere. Indeed, I am suggesting that out of despair may come hope, out of loss and defeat may come victory, out of death may come new life, out of crucifixion comes resurrection.

When we frame it theologically, we quickly find this to be an old and familiar song. For it is our human way to cast our dreams and ambitions; then apply ourselves mightily to the task of achieving them. Only to find that the more we rely upon ourselves, the less we rely upon the grace of God; and the less we rely upon the grace of God, the more we are subject to the fickle ways of human avarice, greed, pride, and folly. Jesus admonished (Mt 6:19-20), "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal." But what does this mean? What does this look like? How do we do it? The disciples of Jesus had to learn this too. For them, as for us, it begins in crisis – accompanied by no small amount of anxiety.

For the disciples, the ending is abrupt, sudden, discordant. (Quote): "The women – Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome – went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." (End quote) That's how it ends, Mark's Gospel: they were afraid

Easter begins in death. Jesus' death was brutal, fast, ugly. For those who knew and loved him, who shaped and defined their lives in relation to him, Jesus' death was an unspeakable horror and loss. For death steals away the future they had imagined, or at least had assumed. Not just the death of one they love, it was the death of a plan, the death of a dream, the death of our future. The women and other disciples faced all of these in Jesus' death.

But it is not the end; it is not finished. In truth – as they discover – it is the beginning of new life. The tomb was empty. We learn not from Mark's Gospel but from other sources that when they fled the women found the others. We hear that Jesus came to the room where they were hiding in fear and offered them Shalom, God's peace; that he appeared to the twelve and told them to go, baptize, and make disciples of all nations. Later, as Jesus had promised, the Holy Spirit came upon them as a mighty wind with tongues of fire; they were filled with the Spirit and with power. Immediately, in the midst of their own struggle, their own crisis, Jesus turned them to see themselves in a new way; Jesus turned them to serve others.

Thus began the work of putting things back together in a new way. They began to gather in small communities and tell one another the stories and teachings that they had heard from him or about him. Tentatively at first, then with growing conviction, they began to do what he had told them to do: to share all that they had with one another, to care for the sick in their midst, and the destitute. To go from neighbor to neighbor and town to town and tell what they could of the love of God. And especially to embrace the outcast, especially the outcast. They began to teach and even to heal.

To share just a couple of stories in particular: We hear that early on, as their numbers grew, gathered in Jerusalem, "the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and ... everything they owned was held in common. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold, laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had

need.” (Acts 4:32-35)

On another occasion, a man lame from birth was lying by the gate of the city asking for alms. When he saw two of the disciples, Peter and John, he asked them for alms. “But Peter said, ‘I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk.’ And he took him by the right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.”

In these two, and many other, instances we see the disciples forging a new way, discerning and creating a new path for themselves. They had thought Jesus was going to do it all for them, had thought that if they stuck with him, he’d tear down the imperial Roman authority, set to right the corrupt Temple practices, and they would march with him in victory, on his right and on his left.

But now they saw more clearly, what he meant when he told them that walking in the way of God, the way of life, required leaving the way they had known.

The way of God – to which you and I are called; at the core of our being we are called by God – the way of God for us as for the disciples is shaped first and foremost by sharing the gifts that each could bring to the table. Some had much, some had little; all had some, a gift to share for the common good. The way of God is shaped by standing together, standing most especially with those who have not the strength, or resources, or power to stand alone.

Living in the Kingdom of God is not such a mystery after all. For in this, his resurrection, Jesus has opened the way to new life for us all. Walking in the way of the risen Christ is a matter of shaping our lives as Christ lived, as Christ would have us live, loving one another, sharing our gifts, standing together.

In the new dawn of Easter, those first disciples discovered bit by bit, one small step at a time, something Jesus had always told them: that when Jesus was gone and no longer present in his body on earth, that they themselves would need to be Jesus’ body. The only feet Jesus’ had to take him from house to house, were their feet. The only eyes Jesus’ had with which to see the injustice and to weep, were their eyes. The only heart Jesus’ had to be filled with outrage or filled with compassion, were their hearts. The only hands Jesus’ had to take up the work that needs to be done in their fragile communities, were their hands. And the only way those disciples could discover this truth was when they became Jesus’ feet and walked, Jesus’ eyes and wept, Jesus’ heart filled with passion and justice, Jesus’ hands and embraced.

Out of despair may come hope, out of loss and defeat may come victory, out of death comes new life, out of crucifixion comes resurrection. May your life be filled this day with the grace and power of the Risen Christ, for in Christ Jesus shall all be made alive. Alleluia! Alleluia!