

“Ongoing Easter”

Mark 16: 1-8

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What a strange way to end the most remarkable story ever told. We prefer stories that tie all the loose ends up neatly, answer any lingering questions and leave people feeling reasonably satisfied. The ending to Mark’s account of the resurrection is abrupt and perplexing not just for the women at the tomb, but for us hearing it again more than two thousand years later. The women come, receive the amazing news that Jesus is going ahead of them into Galilee, he is not dead as they believed and they respond with silence. Mark’s ending is not a mistake as some later church fathers might have thought. There is a method to his madness, though it is not always obvious. As we hear Mark’s account of the Easter events, we are left wanting more, or something different than what we receive.

There are no Alleluias from the women who have waited three days to go to the tomb. There are no Alleluias for those who watched their beloved friend die a horrible death. Nothing seems praiseworthy. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome were with Jesus until the end. They watched Joseph of Arimethea take him away, wrapped lovingly in a clean shroud and place him in his own tomb. They worried and wondered what would happen next. Then early in the morning, they went to the tomb to take care of Jesus.

On that morning their most pressing concern was whether or not they would be able to roll the stone away from the entrance. They knew going to the tomb was the first step in moving on, with their grieving, with their lives, with the ministry that Jesus had entrusted to them. As they approached the tomb they could see that the stone had been rolled away and still there were no Alleluias. The young man told them that Jesus was not there but had gone ahead of them to Galilee. Do not linger here, go and tell the others that Jesus has gone ahead of them. Still, no Alleluias, just stunned silence.

Mark tells us they fled from the tomb for terror and amazement had seized them. The story ends in silence and Jesus never appears. There is where Mark intends for the story to end. There is no closure, there is no ending. That is the point. The ending is up to us. Of all the gospel accounts of the resurrection, Mark’s gospel invites us to stand where those women stood. Those three women did not see Jesus. Neither do we. They didn’t hear him call out their names. Neither do we. They were not invited to touch his wounds. We haven’t touched his wounds either. These three witnesses are our silent sisters who leave it up to us to complete the story. The writer Joan Mitchell says, “...the silence of the last disciple characters surviving in the narrative bring the readers and hearers to their own thresholds of faith, to the limit of words to speak the unspeakable...and to the limit of human experience to trust Who or What is beyond death...In our foremothers’ silence, the narrative still calls the disciples of the next generation to speak for themselves, and bring the gospel into dialogue with their lives.” (Joan L. Mitchell, *Beyond Fear and Silence*, 115)

Perhaps we should worry less about what people believe happened more than 2000 years ago and consider whether we are living as if resurrection still happens. It we are not Easter people, if we don't embody that hope-filled, boundary breaking miracle then what is the point? Dick is fond of the quote from Clarence Jordan that often appears in our Easter bulletin. Jordan prophetically said, "The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb, but the *full hearts of his transformed disciples*. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a *spirit-filled fellowship*. Not a rolled-away stone, but a *carried-away church*." Clarence Jordan was a little known American saint of the faith. He was born in Talbotton, Georgia in 1912, the seventh of ten children. The Jordans were active members of the local Southern Baptist church. At church Clarence was taught a vision of racial equality where they sang songs like, ("Red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in God's sight..."), but he was increasingly bothered that these lyrics were in stark contrast to the racial discrimination he regularly witnessed outside church walls, not to mention the racial segregation on Sunday mornings.

Clarence earned a bachelors degree in agriculture and eventually a PhD in Greek New Testament studies. He felt called to take Jesus' demanding words in the Sermon on the Mount seriously. He dreamed of starting an intentional community that would unite his two passions. He founded Koinonia Farms outside Americus, GA. From the beginning Clarence put into practice the radical inclusivity of his faith. Workers and residents ate together irrespective of race. In those days in the deep South, this drew the ire of the Klu Klux Klan. There were many caustic encounters with local racist residents, and he would often ask those with loyalties to their southern heritage, "Your choice seems quite clear. It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ."

Koinonia Farms eventually became Koinonia Partners which birthed Habitat for Humanity, under the leadership of Millard Fuller who was deeply inspired by Clarence Jordan. What is most important as we celebrate another Easter is not what happened 2000 years ago, but what is happening today. How do we become that spirit-filled fellowship? Where do you feel carried away in the name of the Risen Christ? How do we partner with God to transform despair into hope, apathy into compassion, hate into love, and death into new life?

Clarence Jordan is one of Dick Allen's favorite modern day prophets. I am deeply moved and challenged by the poetry of Wendell Berry. In his poem "Manifesto: The Mad Farmer Liberation Front" he ends by inviting people to practice resurrection. That phrase confronts me in my discipleship every day, how do I practice resurrection? It is more important to practice resurrection than to merely believe that it happened. Here is a portion of that poem:

"So, friends, every day do something
that won't compute. Love the Lord.
Love the world. Work for nothing.
Take all that you have and be poor.
Love someone who does not deserve it.

Denounce the government and embrace
the flag. Hope to live in that free
republic for which it stands.
Give your approval to all you cannot
understand. Praise ignorance, for what man
has not encountered he has not destroyed.

Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millenium. Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest
that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested
when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.

Put your faith in the two inches of humus
that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion – put your ear
close, and hear the faint chattering
of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world. Laugh.
Laughter is immeasurable. Be joyful
though you have considered all the facts.”

Writer and postmodern storyteller Peter Rollings, has written a powerful monologue that speaks to what it might look like to practice, or fail to practice resurrection. Rollins begins with the intentionally shocking assertion that,

“Without equivocation or hesitation I fully and completely admit that I deny the resurrection of Christ. This is something that anyone who knows me could tell you, and I am not afraid to say it publicly, no matter what some people may think.”

After a dramatic pause, he continues,

“I deny the resurrection of Christ every time I do not serve at the feet of the oppressed, each day that I turn my back on the poor; I deny the resurrection of Christ when I close my ears to the cries of the downtrodden and lend my support to an unjust and corrupt system. However there are moments when I affirm that resurrection, few and far between as they are. I affirm it when I stand up for those who are forced to live on their knees, when I speak for those who have had their tongues torn out, when I cry for those who have no more tears left to shed.”¹

¹ Carl Gregg, “Practice Resurrection: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter” March 30, 2012.

Jordan, Berry and Rollins invite us to consider what it would be like to practice resurrection. What would it be like to be a carried away church? What is it like to deny the resurrection? Perhaps your denial comes in the form of silence, like our spiritual foremothers. Perhaps we like they, will eventually move through our terror-filled silence to full acceptance and embodiment of our resurrection faith. As we gather to celebrate another Easter, we remind a skeptical, doubting world it is not so important what people believed 2000 years ago about this mysterious life altering event. What is most important is what it means to you today. The disciples' silence was no mistake. Mark knew what he was doing when he ended his gospel this way. We write the rest of the story. We live a resurrected faith; alive, vibrant, sustaining, challenging, combative, transformative, submissive, mysterious...you add your own adjective here. May each of us be carried away in the name of the Resurrected One? Then, with great joy, we will break our silence with an exuberant Alleluia!! Let us proclaim it together: Alleluia!! Amen

Sources:

Carl Gregg. "Practice Resurrection: Progressive Christian Theology for Easter," March 30, 2012.

Barbara K. Lundblad, "Beyond Fear and Silence," ON Scripture, April 3, 2012.