*“CAN YOU STAND IT?”*

Mark 16:1-8

Easter, 2021

 Can you stand it? Can you stand it when the inexplicable, the uncontrollable, the unpredictable happens to you? Can you stand it when God decides to be God?

 A pastor tells the story of going to visit a church member who had been in an accident and had lost the feeling and mobility in his legs. At the close of the visit, the pastor prayed and asked God to bring healing. Suddenly the patient said, “Hey, there’s a tingling sensation in my legs. Yes! I can feel my legs. I think I can . . . walk now.”

 The pastor stammered something about not pushing it, but the patient struggled out of the wheel chair, stood on his feet, and slowly took a few steps. The patient cried out, “It’s a miracle. God healed me!”

 When the pastor got to his scar, he felt faint. He rested his hands and head on the steering wheel for a moment, then looked heavenward and said, “God, thank you for healing that man. Now, don’t ever do that to me again!”

 Yes, the inexplicable, the uncontrollable power of God can be downright terrifying. To have God on our hands is to be subject to an unpredictable power rampant in our world.

 And this is what Mark describes as the overwhelming reality of that first Easter morning. We find three women—faithful disciples who have not run away—trudging resolutely toward the tomb. These women have witnessed the torture, the pain, the blood, the horrific agony of the cross. Now, with their emotions carefully tucked beneath a blanket of numbness, they are planning to put the finishing touches on this death. Just as generations of people have tried to do, these women want to put death behind them. Perhaps, as they prepare to anoint the body their bruised hearts are echoing the words of Edna St. Vincent Millay:

 *Life must go on.*

 *Though good men die:*

 *Dan, take your medicine;*

 *Annie, do the dishes;*

 *Life must go on;*

 *I forget just why.*

Yes, in all times and in all places, grief is a devastating busines.

 If we look closely, we will see that Mark’s gospel is different from other accounts of Easter morning. It is sparse; it is lean . . . and it is unfinished. Women find an empty tomb. But instead of feeling comforted, relieved—as Mary does in John’s gospel—Mark’s three women flee—saying nothing to anyone. Why? Because they are terrified; because they just can’t stand it. Here, there are no appearance stories, no gentle Jesus calling Mary’s name, no wounds to touch, no supposedly dead people appearing through locked doors. No, here in Mark, there is only a stone mysteriously rolled away, a strange young man, an empty cave . . . and a promise.

 But wait a minute. There are not just one, but two alternative endings to Mark’s gospel. Most commentators have long agreed that these extra endings are not part of the original Mark. You’ll notice in your bibles that all the rest of what seems to be Mark are set off by a space in the text, and explanatory footnotes, saying that the best and most ancient and trustworthy texts we have just end at v. 8. They don’t have all the rest.

 But we cant’ stand that. All the other gospels go on with resurrection appearances and stories with assurances that Jesus really is alive. So we just assume that Mark did, too, and that those footnotes are probably wrong.

 The ancient editors did, too. They couldn’t stand it, either. They added all those extra verses to make the resurrection story satisfying. Even the ancient church couldn’t stand the void. They couldn’t fathom mystery. They could not tolerate a God who keeps us guessing. They just couldn’t’ handle a story of their Christ that ended,

*And they went out and fled from the tomb; for*

*trembling and astonishment had come upon them;*

*and they said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.*

So they added verses that they heard from here and there, and now it sounds like we think it should. But Mark didn’t want it that way. He wanted to end it the way he did. The fact of the matter is, the abrupt ending is the way it was – it’s the most authentic account of the resurrection we have. “They went out and fled from the tomb and said nothing to any one, for they were afraid.” (Period.)

 Now, there have been several groups of crazies and cults who want to flee to the Rockies or the Black Hills and bring the last days on . . . even to bring it on themselves. Not very long ago there was a cult called Heaven’s Gate, in San Diego, who looked for UFOs to take them away into a new life, if the resurrection wasn’t going to come on its own. They would be transformed and translated . . . and escaped . . . from things of this life into something different and surely better, more real than what we have here, right? . . . the life of UFOs.

 In light of these sorts of groups who look to transfer from this life into a supposedly higher nature out in the outer spaces, resurrection is a little hard to preach and teach, for us who consider ourselves reasonable. I mean, how is what we believe any different than what those UFO lovers believed in California? Isn’t their yearning for a life beyond this life—a life at a higher level—is this not the same thing that our creeds and dogmas and doctrines have been teaching for more than 2000- years? God is a God of heaven, of future and better life? Well, the answer—particularly from Mark’s perspective—is a decisive “No!”

First, Mark’s tomb is completely empty. There is no corpse carefully laid out with a purple cloth triangle covering the face; no suitcase packed with a dollar bill and some quarters. Wherever Jesus is—all of Jesus is there—body and soul. Resurrection is not a repudiation of the body--a repudiation of the human part, the human substance, of life. No, resurrection is part of incarnation. Resurrection is *part of God* fully embodied in the physical realm of existence—God blessing the body and calling it good,. After all, Jesus’ ministry was focused on physical healing—touching, blessing, loving the bodies of God’s people. Jesus’ very existence was an affirmation of the body. Whatever resurrection is, it is bodily resurrection—a proclamation that the physical and the spiritual are intimately connected to one another.

Many first-century Jews believed in the resurrection of the body—a transformation that would happen at the end of time when all the world is finished. Martha, in John 11, says, speaking of her brother Lazarus, “I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.” And the Apostle Paul in the very earliest Christian writings reiterated this view.

So, the radical, new message of Easter is not that somehow there is new life after death. That was already assumed. No, the radical message of Easter is that there is new life *before* death – new life in the very real, physical world in which you and I (and the three women) live in right now. And which Jesus, the Christ, is alive to. The angel says to the women, “Jesus isn’t here. He has been raised. Go to Galilee. There you will see Him.”

And ‘there is more. Whatever happened in Joseph’s garden that morning long ago—ten ton stones moving and corpses disappearing—whatever happened, it was God’s doing.

So it with us. Whatever inexplicable, uncontrollable, unpredictable things that happen in our lives, it is God’s doing. We don’t make resurrections happen. God does. And in every case, these surprises of God are life affirming, not life denying.

One more thing. The most essential difference between the mansions of the cultists and the tomb outside of Jerusalem is this: resurrection is not an escape from life. Resurrection is an invitation to reinvest in life with holy zeal. Resurrection is not an escape from responsibility. Resurrection is a clarion call to be the responsible power of God in the world.

The women are told to go—to go to Galilee—to go back to the place where they live, where they work and play and love their families. To go and tell the world that Jesus is not dead, but alive in it.

Yes, they are called to tell folks that God is a God of surprises—a God who has burst forth in inexplicable, uncontrollable, unpredictable ways one more time. Yes, the women are told to go and tell, trusting that Jesus has gone on ahead of them to the *ordinary places* where they live. There, in their daily lives, together with the Risen Christ, they will continue to turn dead places into living places, dead dreams into living dreams, dead love into living love.

And the women were terrified. What does it mean to have God on our hands . . . a living God? It means that we won’t know what in the world is coming next, because it’ll be God’s doing. What else might they have been terrified of? Well, if Jesus told them to heal the sick, could they really count on a person becoming well? What if she didn’t? Or what if she did become well? Then you’d have a reputation of having God on your hands, and what would that mean? Would you or I be terrified? People, the stone *is* rolled away. Jesus is alive. God is rampant in your world.

God has acted in inexplicable, uncontrollable, unpredictable ways one more time. God has rolled the stones away and emptied out the dead places of our lives. God has let Jesus loose, to wander on ahead of us, in all the Galilees of our ordinary living. And once again God has left the story unfinished—counting on you and me to complete the good News of the Gospel.

Amen.

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