

Easter Sunday 9am service 12 April 2009
By Reverend Susanna Pain

Mark 16:1-8

‘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.’ (Mk 16:8)

‘fled’

‘terror and amazement’

‘said nothing’

‘were afraid...’

What a way to begin Easter day! No trumpets, no fanfare, not even any joy, just ‘terror and amazement’ and fear and ... silence.

They went to the tomb expecting death, and found ... what exactly?

A young man, wrapped in a white robe as Jesus had been wrapped in a linen cloth – wrapped in a white robe.’ ‘white ... our minds hark back to transfiguration glory – (white robe also used to describe the martyrs of Revelation)

Transfiguration, that’s a long time ago, just before Lent began... Transfiguration, the women were deeply troubled as were the crowd after Jesus transfiguration, as were the disciples when Jesus spoke of death. The young man sat on the right hand side, the places of honour sought by James and John...

and like most messengers, he said, ‘do not be alarmed’. Why do angels always say that, when they startle you with the unexpected?

But Jesus is no longer just ‘the Nazarene’ or even ‘the beloved son. The young man identifies him as ‘the crucified’. This Jesus is not where Joseph laid him. The authorities have not had the last word. Jesus is risen - a word that recalls earlier healing episodes. (p398 Ched Myers)

Then, the crux of the matter:

‘You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.’ Throughout the story Jesus was ‘sought’ by those who in the end betrayed him – the crowds, his own family and community, and of course the authorities.

‘He has been raised; he is not here’.

‘Look, there is the place they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter (yes even Peter who denied him). 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’ You will ‘see’ him – If we have eyes to ‘see’ we will be able to ‘see’ Jesus still going before us. That’s, the implication.

‘He has been raised; he is not here’ Whoa, way too much information!

I am not ready for this.

It’s a big shift from Friday.

‘He is risen’. ‘He has gone ahead’.

I cannot quite comprehend...

In the past many were commanded to remain silent, and spoke. Here, commanded to speak – they tell no one – and flee..

But God is out of the box, on the loose. This is indeed scary stuff.
uncontainable, out there
as Jesus said he would be.

Now that is scary. Death, I can cope with, Death I am familiar with, but life?
Unrestrained unfettered life – life,
This is a gift, so what is there to be afraid of?

(Ched Myers p 401)

‘Of course I am afraid, because the martyr-figure beckons me to take up the journey afresh, to return to the beginning of the story for a new reading – a new enactment. The young man’s invitation sought to provoke trepidation in us if we take it seriously because in the words of Bonhoeffer ‘when Christ calls a person he bids them to come and die’. (p 233,234 Eggs and ashes)

What is there to be afraid of? Well, perhaps there was good reason for the fear that overcame these women, for with the resurrection the pattern of life and death was broken – for ever. With the resurrection not only is this pattern blown wide open, now all that happens in life requires to be reviewed. For if God has broken even the bonds of death, then all dying, from whatever the cause and however tragic, is nevertheless not the final word on us human beings. Paul’s great cry of triumph: ‘Death, where is thy sting? Grave, where is thy victory?’ now surely applies to every death – and offers the possibility of a totally new approach to the whole of life from now on.

That is frightening.

But perhaps there is another reason to be afraid. And perhaps we would do well to pause and consider it for a moment. Maybe we can put it this way: Watch out! God is on the loose. God is out of the box!

You see, when you think about it, haven’t we human beings always tried to keep God in a box, under our control? We’ve tried to keep God in the box of religion. We have allowed ourselves to be persuaded that God can be subjected to rules and regulation and religious practices, can be under the control of religious hierarchies, church committees, human systems. Do this, and God will be pleased with you; do that, and we can assure you that you will fall under God’s severe displeasure. Isn’t that the way, very often, that religious bodies imagine they control God?

But believe in resurrection and God is free, free from all religious systems, free to use religion to meet us on God’s terms. As Jesus told us, ‘The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sounds it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of spirit.’ (Good News Bible)

So perhaps there is reason to be a little afraid, as we look at the empty tomb: To be afraid that our attempts to control God through religion are doomed; to be afraid that our cherished traditions are, in fact, not the last word, for God has had the last word – or rather we should maybe say the last laugh of God's life as God broke free from every bond on that first Easter Day. God is on the loose! Tremble then, all who think they have God tied down with religion.

And if God is free – if Christ is risen – then they can in fact, be no forcing of God into any human box at all. Not only can we no longer think that God is a Protestant or a Catholic, or white, black or brown; no longer think that God is more like us nice middle class folk; no longer imagine God prefers Christians to Muslims or vice versa. Now we can no longer allow any ideology or nation to hijack God. God is not on 'our' side any more than God is on 'their' side. So tremble, you statesmen and women who imagine you can co-opt God onto your side or into your army or into you ideological box. God can never again be tied down by any of our political systems, however wonderful we may imagine them to be. God is on the loose.

And I suspect – indeed I am increasingly convinced – that to truly celebrate the resurrection, to truly welcome God on the loose, we need to be constantly willing to hand over control to God. All must be constantly handed over, laid down, given up, and we must allow God to be God: crucified and risen and on the loose in our world, out of control.

*So, I like the way Mark tells the story. I like the way he doesn't try to pretty it up,
Or analyse it, or make it fit any of our preconceptions. I like the picture of these women and their fear. And I like the thrill of imagining the unimaginable: the One who made the sun, the moon and the stars bursting out not just from the tomb, but from every box into which we try to put him, and striding free and majestic and totally out of our control, into all our lives; inviting, challenging, summoning us to be free – like him!*

(by John Harvey in *Eggs and Ashes: Practical & Liturgical Resources for Lent and Holy Week*, by Ruth Burgess, Chris Polhill, published by Wild Goose Publications, Glasgow, 2004 p 233 - 234)

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