

TERROR AND AMAZEMENT

Mark 16:1-8

Broadway United Church of Christ

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2006

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When I was a kid, one of my big dreams was to fly. I couldn't wait to get on a plane and soar above the clouds. And when I did fly for the first time as an exchange student on my way to Spain, the entire experience sent shivers of excitement up and down my spine. There was no fear. I loved the rumbling take off, the initial lift off of the earth, the bouncing along through clouds and rain, and then pure blueness as we climbed to our cruising altitude. Later, in my first job out of college, I flew at least once a month for the company and I loved it. But something happened along the way, and I still don't know what it is, that turned what had been a pleasurable experience into a terrifying one. This fear reached its apex when Marcos and I were making one of our annual pilgrimages to Brazil. These flights are almost always at night, and after having been served dinner, both of us had fallen asleep. Sometime in the middle of the night, I suddenly awoke. It took me a minute to realize where I was. The cabin was dark. Almost everyone was sleeping. I sat there, very still, feeling the vibration of the plane through the soles of my feet. Suddenly, all of my senses seemed concentrated in my feet and filled with what can only be categorized as terror, I became painfully aware that directly underneath me was nothing but 30,000 feet of darkness and then the vast ocean. I began to tremble and sweat and gasp for

air... and pray. I am very religious when I fly – and nowadays, a little drugged, with the help of my doctor.

In the months that followed, I tried and tried to understand why I felt such terror. And then one day, reading a Times editorial about the crash of the flight on its way to the Dominican Republic, it became clear. Being up in the air in a hunk of metal, defying the laws of gravity, is an concentrated example of what we all live with every day but chose to ignore: our basic lack of control. And what we cannot control or contain terrifies us. It is a most basic human response.

I love the resurrection account from the book of Mark. It is short and sweet and thoroughly human. And although the book in its present form continues through verse 20, it is commonly held by scholars that these additional 12 verses were added by later editors, unhappy with the original ending of Mark's gospel which reads: “And 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.”

The men who had followed Jesus had all gone into hiding, but some brave women, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome had decided to honor the body of Jesus, and to fulfill religious and cultural obligations, by going to the tomb early on a Sunday morning to anoint the corpse with spices. And as

they walked along, grief-stricken and tired from the horror of the days before, they asked one another, “Who will roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb for us?” Despite all that Jesus had said to them, no one expected anything out of the ordinary after the crucifixion. The men were running for their lives and the women were concerned about the logistics of doing the right thing. And all of them were consumed by a horrible grief... a very human story.

Upon their arrival, the women were shocked, and perhaps relieved to see that the stone had already been rolled away. Upon entering the tomb, a mysterious young man, dressed in a white robe, scared them to death and then said: “Don’t be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised. He is not here...” And utterly shocked by what they had seen and heard, they fled from the tomb, frightened into silence. Suddenly, the illusion of the order of their daily lives was challenged by something completely out of their control, and it terrified them. Isn’t it interesting that their initial response to the working of God in their lives was fear? It upset the way they thought life should be. Easier to deal with a dead Jesus, whose body we can anoint and thus fulfill our duty, than to deal with a missing Jesus, an illusive Jesus whom we cannot control.

Do you really think that God is still speaking? And if so, does that idea frighten you a little bit? It does me. I already know how to deal with Jesus. I’m a

preacher's kid who became a preacher. I, like the women of this story, know what my duties are. But if I really heard the voice of God and that voice told me something I never would have expected, would it terrify me? Would I run away? And if we, as a church, really began to pray about our future, and if we heard the voice of God calling us to be or do something we would never have expected, would it terrify us? Would we run away? Would we hide behind our history and tradition and what we have always known? Would we choose the safety of the tomb over resurrection?

Resurrection is scary stuff. The idea is so completely out of our daily experience that we tend to run away from it. We come to church on Easter because it's the thing to do, but to really believe that a dead man was brought back to life challenges what we think we know. It pushes us out of our comfort zones. Likewise, to really believe that our lives can be reborn, that God can break-in in surprising, death-defying ways challenges our comfort because it's out of our control and that can terrify us.

Ten years ago, I left the pastoral ministry because I was angry and bone-tired. I was tired of the fear, of the secrecy, of the struggle, of the dishonesty. And I suppose on some level, I really believed that the church would never allow gay and lesbian people the freedom to preach the good news of Jesus Christ. So, I did what we all do when something dies. I mourned, I buried it and I got on with my

life. I took a job in public relations. I moved into a new apartment. I made new friends.

In the years that followed, when someone would see that spark for ministry in me and would try to encourage it, I would quickly shut them out. The pain of the death was still too close to home and talk of resurrection seemed too risky to even consider. Better to deal with something dead than to deal with the idea of something reborn over which I might have little or no control. It terrified me. There is only one person I would discuss it with, and he is sitting in this church today. And slowly and lovingly, Marcos helped me to at least consider that the promise of new life might be true; that the resurrection of my call was not completely out of the question.

The original ending of the Gospel of Mark concludes with the women terrified and silent, fleeing away. But just a verse before, the young man dressed in white told them that if they wanted to see the resurrection for themselves, then they would have to act before they could see. Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee, that province where his ministry had first begun. If you want to see him, the young man said, then take this trip by faith. Travel with your fears, in spite of your fears and at the end of the road, you will find Jesus, alive and well. And thank God, despite their doubts and fears, they took the trip. And the rest of

Christian history depends on what they found there: Jesus, no longer dead, but risen. And their terror turned to amazement.

More than four years ago, with fear and trepidation, I started a journey back toward pastoral ministry. It was a long road, with many disappointments. There were moments when I was so tired I almost gave up. Fear of failure was my constant companion. And there were plenty of days when it was much easier for me to tend to my tomb than to hope for resurrection. But somewhere in the back of my mind I kept remembering the promise of God to make all things new. And today, here I stand, experiencing a resurrection more beautiful and rewarding than I dared hope, my fears turned to amazement.

I love this day more than any other in the Christian calendar. It's not just the music and the flowers and the chocolate. It's certainly not because I understand and can articulate all the mysteries of resurrection. I love this day because it speaks to me of my own experience with God, a God who raised Jesus from the dead, and who raises us from death to life, not only after we die, but in all the waking, struggling, confusing journeys of our lives.

These brave women took a chance. They decided to make the journey to Galilee, despite their fears, abandoning the illusion of control, hoping and praying that at

the end of the road, they would find Jesus. And when they did, their fear was turned to amazement.

Dear friends, we all have journeys to make, as individuals and as a church. It can be frightening to take the first step. It is often easier to stick with what we know, even if what we know is a tomb. But if we will have the faith and the courage, like those brave women of old, to step out of our comfort zones, to believe the voice of God speaking words of life when death is all around us, then we too, at the end of the road, will find Jesus alive and well. And like the women, seeing Jesus alive and well will change our lives. It will change our church. Our neighborhood will be changed. Our society will be changed. Peace and justice will spring forth. The world will take notice. And we, who once were terrified, will instead stand amazed by the ongoing, unstoppable power of resurrection.

Alleluia! Amen!