

“Beginnings and Endings” / Mark 16:1-8 / Easter 2012

Happy Resurrection Day, this bright April morning! May the joyful mystery of resurrection reach into all the dead parts of your soul this day, blessing them with new life, so that you, too, may become part of the new and living thing the Spirit is doing in this place and in our world. May you, too, go from here reinvigorated, brought back to life. Then return to your homes, and your workplaces, there to apply that newness to all the oldness and all the weariness you encounter.

The longer I live, the more I come to believe that the message of our faith comes down to that one sentence: “Do not be afraid.” Wasn’t it at the conception of Jesus, all the way back in Advent, that an angel appeared to Mother Mary and said, “Do not be afraid”? And later, wasn’t it in those night skies above Bethlehem, at his birth, that the angel sang, “Do not be afraid”? And isn’t it right here at Jesus’ grave that a man in white has the very same words on his lips, “Do not be afraid.” Isn’t it uncanny how the ending of the Jesus story—if there is an ending—resembles the beginning? The poet T.S. Eliot said it long ago, “In our beginning is our ending.” And here at both ends of the gospel story, despite all the drama and the passion that stands in between, we come to this selfsame declaration: Fear not. Have no fear. Never fear. It’s something we need to be told again and again. For no matter how many times we hear it, you and I, we return to our old postures of fear. Easter happens when we trudge the well-worn path back to the garden of our fears—like the women going early to the tomb—but when we get there instead of fear we discover courage, and hope, and life.

Use your imagination to make that Easter trek with me, through the grass still wet with dew, beneath the brilliant full moon of early dawn. Make the early morning journey with me to the garden of *your own* fears. But since I can’t stand up here and name your fears, instead I’ll name my own, knowing that though we fear slightly different things in life, my fears and your aren’t really all that different. One of my biggest fears in all of life, aside from great white sharks and losing my hair...is public speaking. I am terrified to ever be the center of attention. As a kid—the middle child of five—I survived by disappearing into the background. Like a mouse or a termite, my strength was in making you forget that I was even there. If people overlooked me, I could do get away with pretty much anything I wanted.

Then when, through a series of unexpected events, I ended up going to seminary, I started having these recurring nightmares that plague me still to this very day. I’ve told you about them before. For the last eleven years, I’ve had dreams about standing in a pulpit, looking out at a crowded sanctuary—which should have clued me in that I was only dreaming—and realizing that I left my sermon notes at home. I was on my own. I had to wing it. Now, this dream comes in a variety of flavors. Sometimes I just didn’t have time to prepare a sermon, and so just minutes before the service starts, I’m frantically pacing in my office and trying to scribble down thoughts. Once, I was doing the funeral of a prominent citizen, and as I stood up in the pulpit to eulogize him, I realized that not only did I know nothing about him, but I’d forgotten to write anything down to read about him. And so, there I stand blathering, clearing my throat, and blinking at the crowd of mourners. I’ve always been scared public of speaking, maybe because it pulls me front and center, which is a spot that I’m not comfortable occupying. But I’m coming to believe that our fears are somehow linked to our desires.

And so the resurrection parable of my own fears goes like this: When I was in my early twenties and living in West Africa, the school chaplain showed up at my door drunk at 9:00pm. It was the Tuesday night of Holy Week. We would have a school chapel service the next day, Wednesday, then the kids would go home on Easter break. He wanted me to read the Easter story at the chapel service—with no microphone, in front of 900 students—the very next day. I had never spoken in public before. I was terrified. But the chaplain was a forceful man at the best of times, and when he was drunk, there was just no reasoning with him. So he sat there drunkenly in my living room and taught me about elocution, and projecting my voice, and making eye contact with a crowd. I didn't get any sleep at all that night, I was so frightened to stand up and read in public. The morning and the fateful moment came at last, and I stood in that old mission church, gazing out at those 900 teenagers, and I read that ancient story just the way the chaplain had told me. The students sat quietly and listened. I could see it in the intentness of their faces; they were really listening. And in that moment, I felt something beautiful and unanticipated. The place where I expected to find fear...felt like home. I found that I loved the story that I was reading. As I heard my own voice reading those old familiar words, it was as if I was hearing them for the first time, believing them for the first time. It occurred to me in that moment that the story wasn't meant for private reading and personal devotions. It was meant to be read and heard aloud, publicly. And in that moment of peace and calm, in front of 900 African students, I had my first inkling that maybe, just maybe, I would spend a little more time in the pulpit. And so, from my place of deepest fear... a whole new life began to form.

Now remember, we've just trekked through the garden of my fears in order to arrive at yours. For I believe that you too have known this resurrection mystery, when the very thing you feared has turned around offered you not sadness and loss, but new life. Perhaps a serious illness gave you a depth of living and loving that you never knew before? Perhaps you went dutifully to accept your punishment, once, but instead of being hurt or humiliated, you discovered forgiveness. Perhaps you've had to admit a painful truth to someone you loved, and instead of hating you for it, in the end, they continued to love you, and you came away freer and more able to be yourself. Perhaps you nurtured such rage, such anger, at a person until you went to confront them, and in that moment of person-to-person sharing, you found it in your heart to love the one who hurt you. Perhaps you returned to a place where all you'd ever found was disappointment, or boredom, or tedium, and there unexpectedly you found joy. These are Easter moments, times of resurrection, and they have the power to transform our lives and our world, for they sing anew that angel song of old, "Do not be afraid."

Does it mean that my fear of public speaking was fixed once and for all in my early twenties by a drunken chaplain? Does it mean that your fears were all banished in a magic moment, just before you rode off into the sunset? No, of course not. That's the crazy, holy mystery of Easter: It's a lifelong journey toward the garden of our fears, and each time we find life there, we're a little less afraid. Easter is a new posture for living, one that's open to the possibility of beautiful surprises. And that is why I like Mark's version of that first resurrection dawn. Mark's ending is sloppy and unrehearsed. It has jagged edges. In fact, Mark doesn't really give us an ending. Instead, he leaves it up to the reader to find the living Christ back in his or her workaday world.

Look at Mark's Easter story; it's similar to Matthew's and Luke's except that it doesn't have an ending: The women go to the tomb, check. They find it empty, check. They're doubtful and afraid, check. But then the man in white tells those frightened women to go back to Galilee, where the whole Jesus-adventure started. Go back and do it all again, and there you will find the living Jesus in your daily worlds, in your daily lives. No one ever sees the resurrected Jesus in Mark. They're simply told to go home, because that's where they'll find him. Oh, and by the way, "Do not be afraid." I can understand the desire to rewrite Mark's sloppy non-ending. At least two different writers have tried, as you can see in verses 9 through 20. It makes us feel safe if truth is all laid out for us, from beginning to end, on a color-coded graph. But I think Mark's whole point is that there is no neat graph, and there is no end. The only truth is not what you know, or what you believe, but how you live back in Galilee. You have to discover the living Christ for yourself at your kitchen sinks, and in your boardrooms, and bathrooms, and clubs, doctor's examining rooms, and voting booths. Maybe we're not called to fix rough endings. Sometimes the sloppy endings are the truest and most beautiful, for they do not protect us from our fears; they leave us free to face those fears. And just to prove it, look, here's the same message you got back in Advent and at Christmas, "Do not be afraid. Never fear. Have no fear."

It's scary not to have things laid out for us clearly in black and white. It can lend itself to all kinds of misunderstandings. Long ago, a certain Spanish bishop decided debate the Jews in his community, saying that if he could stump them in the debate, they would have to leave his region. The Jewish community chose a wise old rabbi to debate the bishop. But because of the language barrier, they agreed to a silent debate, using only gestures and objects. The bishop began the debate by holding up three fingers, to which the rabbi replied by holding up one finger. Next, the bishop waved his finger around his head, and the rabbi pointed to the ground where he sat. The bishop pulled out a chalice full of wine and a communion wafer. The rabbi pulled out an apple. With that, the bishop left in a huff, and the Jews were allowed to stay in the region.

Later, the priests asked their bishop what had gone wrong. And the bishop explained, "I held up three fingers to represent the blessed Trinity, but the rabbi held up one finger to remind me that even the three are one. Then I waved my finger around my head to say that God is all around us, but he countered me by pointing to the ground to say that God is right here, wherever life is. Then I pulled out the communion elements to show him how God overcomes our sins, and he pulled out an apple to remind me of original sin. He outwitted me at every turn."

The Jewish community, too, asked the rabbi what had happened, and the rabbi said, "I don't know. First, he tells me that we have three days to get out of Spain, so I gave him the finger. Then he tells me that the whole country would be cleared of Jews and I told him that we were staying right here." "And then what?" someone asked. "Who knows?" said the rabbi. "He took out his lunch so I took out mine."

Yes, it can lead to confusion when things are not laid out for us clearly. That's why we like, among other things, nice, neat endings. But Mark refuses to give us a clear ending because he knows that the only way to discover resurrection is in the dusty old Galilees of our own living. And let me tell you, I am mainly a rationalist, and I have no idea how resurrection works. But I do believe in resurrection not because it makes sense (it doesn't) but because occasionally, when I've been shuffling along the well-worn paths

through my own little garden of fears, I've brushed up against resurrection: courage in a place where I expected to cower, joy in a place where I expected the same old sorrows. Once, years ago, I tripped over resurrection like a tree root out in the woods, and now I keep going back to the woods because that seems to be where the resurrected Christ prefers to meet me. My fears do creep back in, but now I know how to face them. Now I know that when I do face them, they dissolve. Now I know how to embrace the resurrection truth that in the end—well, there is no end—and there's nothing to fear. Where do you meet resurrection in your life? Maybe you should go there more often.

This is how Easter works. It's not about some historic miracle so much as it is about all the discoveries of new life that still occur. It's a tale of discovering life in the place where you thought you could count on death. Finding forgiveness in a place where you expected condemnation. Going to the place of weeping, but discovering laughter. Somewhere in Haiti there's a mother who sends her children to the same dirty well every day, knowing that the water could make her children sick enough to die. But water is life, and it's the only water she's got. Then, one day, she goes back to that same filthy well to find that a band of suburbanites from Pennsylvania have made the water safe and pure. That's a tale of Easter in which you participate. It happens. Do not be afraid.

And you with your mortgage! You with your web of tangled relationships! You with your secrets, and your envies, and your many loves! Soon we'll collect our lilies and go back to our Galilees, and what will you take home with you this Easter morning? How about these four words, "Do not be afraid." Since our sacred story opens and closes with these simple words, I invite you to make them your own. "Do not be afraid." Whisper them into the your own little deaths. Into all your jealousies, all your worries, all your doubts, "Do not be afraid." It's better than any catechism or creed. Whisper them when you find yourself passing through the morning mist into the garden of your own anxieties or sorrows. "Do not be afraid." Death is strong, but life is stronger. And in the end, there is no end, and there is nothing to fear. Amen.