

“The Depth of Easter”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
Easter Sunday - April 1, 2018

Mark 16: 1-8

As I shared with our governing board, the Session, on Monday night, I tend to be picky about some things. I know that might come as a surprise to some of you. But there are some things which I simply need to be a certain way. One is the kind of pen I use - it's this Pilot brand pen. If I can't find one in my pocket or in my backpack or desk, I'll walk out to my car and see if there's one there before I will use another kind of pen. It's not OCD if you admit you have a problem, is it?

The reason I shared this with the Session was because on Monday I had gotten a haircut earlier that day. And it was the first time in three months that I felt like my world was a little more in order. That's because in January, the woman who has cut my hair for fifteen years had carpal tunnel surgery on her hand. So, while she was recovering from surgery, I had to have my hair cut by her colleague who shares a shop with her in Brownsburg.

Now, for someone like me, this was difficult. And raise your hand if you are pretty particular about who and how your hair is cut. See - I'm not the only OCD weirdo in the room! The truth is once you find someone that cuts your hair the way you like, you never want to leave that person. It's personal, it's specific, and it's routine. When you have to change that routine, it's hard and awkward. I was grateful that the other woman was willing to cut my hair the last couple of months. But I was deeply grateful that Pam was back and could cut my hair last week.

This event reminded me of how important routine is in my life, and for that matter in most of our lives, and how difficult it is when such routine is broken or interrupted. We can be having a normal, productive day at work, and then we get a phone call that a family member is ill, and on our way to see them we get a flat tire and are stranded on the side of the road. We finally get paid up on our bills and think we are starting to get ahead, when we find out the furnace needs to be replaced, or our car is beyond repair, and we are faced with a huge cost which we are not sure we can cover. We've had a great week at school and are looking forward to the weekend and a break, only to learn that a classmate was in an accident and was killed, and we would no longer be seeing her in the hallways or in class. Life is full of routine and order, but life is also full of seasons of disruption and chaos.

Easter morning is the ultimate interruption of our routine. The empty tomb is the most audacious of changes to the norm. As we gather this morning for celebration and joy, we also must come face-to-face with our new reality: that life as we assume it to be is no more, and that nothing - not even death - can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:39).

Of the four gospel accounts of Easter morning, Mark's account is the most honestly human. In Matthew, Luke, and John, we have the risen Christ either greeting the women or disciples in the garden or on the Road to Emmaus. In Mark's account, we barely are given any details, and never have evidence of the

risen Christ. Mark spends 119 verses on Jesus' passion and death, and only eight verses on his resurrection. Not exactly the kind of story that inspires "Hallelujahs!"

For Mark, this story begins on the day when Jesus lay in the tomb. The three women — Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome — went out on Saturday evening to buy spices in order to anoint the body of their teacher and Lord. The Sabbath was over, and they decided to wait until early the next morning to go to the tomb. Mary Magdalene knew which one it was, because she was there when Joseph of Arimathea laid Jesus' body in the new tomb hewn from the rock (15:47). She would lead the women there, and they would care for their master, even in death. In the midst of their grief, they would rely on the Jewish customs and routines to navigate this pain they were feeling.

What greeted them when they arrived was startling, to say the least. The stone which they had worried about was no longer covering the tomb — it stood to the side, allowing free access inside. Then, as they stooped to enter the tomb, they were even more startled. They were greeted by a young man, dressed in a simple white robe, sitting to the right of the place where the body had laid. But the body was not there. Someone had indeed robbed the tomb. They could not even give Jesus a proper Jewish burial.

"Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him." Do not be alarmed? When they arrived, they found the body of Jesus gone, a man sitting inside, and this man told them that he has been raised. This man knew their master, and confirmed for them that this was indeed the correct tomb. Their fears must have been even more heightened than when they first arrived.

"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." Did Jesus tell them this before? Maybe it was the night of his arrest, in the upper room, when he told Peter he would deny him three times and Peter could not believe it. That indeed did happen, and perhaps they remembered Jesus saying something about going ahead of them once he was raised up (14:28). Now, they were supposed to go and tell the others, including Peter, about what they had seen at the tomb of their master: the stone was moved, a young man was sitting in the tomb, and Jesus' body was gone.

"So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement has seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid" (16:8). William Willimon describes the deepest fear the women — and we ourselves — experienced that morning. "If Jesus, the one who was crucified by colluding government and religious leaders, the one who had been crushed by the forces of evil, if this Jesus was now raised, now vindicated by a mighty act of God and raised to new life, if God has stepped in and mightily reversed the whole march of time and history and raised Jesus, then the women knew enough to know that everything in the world had been turned upside down and that nothing would ever be the same again"

([Pulpit Resource](#), Year B, 22).

In many ways, I have always appreciated Mark's account of Easter morning the most, because it is stark and honest and, as I said earlier, the most human. We don't leave the tomb with sweet Alleluias and smiles plastered on our faces. We leave the tomb with fear and amazement in our hearts, minds and souls. We leave

shaken to our core, uncertain as to what this all means. Mark takes Easter to a deeper level, forcing us to look inwardly and honestly about what we struggle with in our life, and how God grants us a truly transformative experience at the empty tomb.

I read a book this week that was particularly helpful for me in this regard. It is by Walter Brueggemann, called "The Spirituality of the Psalms." It was recommended to me by my pastoral counselor, David Chaddock, as I shared with him last week about where I am in my grief journey over the death of my father and father-in-law through this past year. He suggested it not specifically because of Brueggemann's focus on the Psalms, but on his characterization of the seasons of life we experience as human beings.

Brueggeman speaks of three seasons which occur and repeat in our human lives. First, we know seasons of satisfaction and well-being - seasons of orientation - when things are orderly and without chaos or disruption. In those times, we are grateful to God for the blessings we have received and know. We also might take for granted what we have, and might forget God's presence, thinking we are in control of all our good fortune.

Second, we know seasons of anguish and pain - seasons of disorientation - when things are chaotic and far from the norm. These are times of great pain and suffering, of loss and death, and we are struggling to know God's presence in our lives. Oftentimes, we are asking why God has caused this disorienting experience in life - bringing illness to our loved one, losing our job, watching a child take a path that is unhealthy, and so on.

Finally, we know seasons of surprise and enlightenment - seasons of new orientation - when things which once were shrouded in darkness now bask in light. These are times when out of great suffering we encounter God's startling love - a moment of joy amid our sadness, a call from a friend which lifted us up, a realization that life will not always be mired in disorder and unease.

We experience these seasons throughout life. We cycle through them at different points and through different experiences. Brueggemann stresses that, "The move of the seasons is transformational and not developmental; that is, the move is never obvious, easy, or 'natural.' It is always in pain and surprise, and in each age it is thinkable that a different move might have been made. Human life is not simply an articulation of a place in which we find ourselves. It is also a movement from one circumstance to another, changing and being changed, finding ourselves surprised by a new circumstance we did not expect, resistant to a new place, clinging desperately to the old circumstance ([Spirituality of the Psalms](#), Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis, MN, © 2002: 8-9).

And yes, in this model, we see parallels to Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. The disciples, women, and other followers of Jesus experienced the plunge into disorientation when they witnessed their teacher and Lord nailed to a cross. The norm of him being by their side was shattered by the violent death he endured. It caused them to doubt, to question, to flee - and to grieve. They were left with uncertainty, anxiety, and yes, fear.

With the women's discovery of an empty tomb on Easter morning, they were quickly brought forth into a season of new orientation. It was surprising, shocking, unexpected, and yes, scary. But they also were amazed by what they witnessed

and heard from the man at the tomb. They were changed – transformed – into new people, new disciples. Even though Mark’s Gospel does not tell that part of the story, we can be sure that others were told of this new orientation. Otherwise we would not be here today.

Life is full of these seasons of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation. The journey of the Christian faith is to be aware and honest of the movement we experience between those seasons of life. Our lives are oriented in meaningful ways, are rooted in goodness and stability and gratitude.

And then – a parent becomes ill, a friend dies unexpectedly, a spouse loses a job, a child prepares to leave for college, a marriage struggles to stay connected, a coworker loses the spark for vocation – and then we are plunged into a season of disorientation. We become disillusioned, confused, angry – with those we love, with the world around us, with the Lord our God. We feel like darkness is all around us, as we stand at the foot of the cross.

The depth of Easter is that in the midst of our disorientated state, God transforms us at the empty tomb. God surprises us by there not being a body where it should be, by re-interrupting the routine of death by saying, “He has been raised; he is not here.” The depth of Easter is that as we face the uncertainty of what is happening around us, God is still there and will always be there, reminding us that “nothing in life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39).

One of the challenges as disciples of the risen Lord is witnessing to this world the depth of this day. Brueggemann says: “The dominant ideology of our culture is committed to continuity and success and to the avoidance of pain, hurt, and loss. The dominant culture is also resistant to genuine newness and real surprise. And our culture is organized to prevent the experience of both. This means that when we practice either move – into disorientation or into new orientation – we engage in a countercultural activity” (ibid). Perhaps our calling as disciples of the risen Jesus is to tell this world that true change and transformation takes place in the midst of our chaos and uncertainty and fear. For that is when we know the deepest level of God’s love for us, as we are transformed into followers of our Lord, crucified and risen.

Where do we find ourselves this Easter morning? We are all standing in front of the empty tomb. But where do we find ourselves? Rooted and oriented in stability? Struggling with chaos and disorientation? Amazed by the new orientation we are given by the empty tomb? As we go from this place, may we allow God to transform us in this moment in time to be witnesses to what is amazing: “He is not here – he has been raised.”

Alleluia. Amen.