

Romans 12:1-2, 9-10, 14-17

Mark 16:1-8

“Not the Most Unbelievable Day Ever”

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I've been thinking all week about this sermon, about what I want to say to you this morning. I would guess that all preachers in all churches everywhere have been doing this. There's something about Easter that feels like a turning up of the heat, like it's opening night at the theater. You know everyone is going to show up for this one and you need to bring your A-game, to put on your best performance yet so that everyone will want to come back again the next night. The problem with this way of thinking, though, is that everyone already knows what's going to happen here today. If we're honest about it, one of the great truths about Easter is that there are no surprises. Tell me I'm wrong about this, but I knew you were going to be here today, and you knew I was going to be here. We've waited all year for this day to come; second only to Christmas. If we don't go to church any other day of the year, we knew we would go today. Maybe we didn't all know where we were going to go, but once we got here, we knew—more or less—how it was all going to go. We could have guessed the hymns we'd be singing. We knew we'd see every color of the rainbow done up in pastels and stitched into a dozen little girl dresses, and that every boy under the age of 12 and over the age of 60 would, for one day only, let a woman style their hair. We knew we'd have to show up early if we wanted to sit in our “regular” pew. We knew what the Bible lesson was going to be and what the sermon would be about, because we all know that the story of Easter is the story of Jesus in the tomb and what happened when the women went to the cemetery in the early morning hours to find the stone had been rolled away. We all know all this. It's predictable.

Mind you, this is not necessarily a bad thing. How wonderful that some stories never get old. How good to have churches that won't pressure you to come back but will simply say, it's good to be together any time. There are no members or visitors here today anyway. We're all just guests, honored guests, in the house of God. How joyful to see the smiles of children, to feel the embrace of friendship among strangers. But still, the day is rather predictable from start to finish and for this reason I think we have to ask ourselves, what is it that make us all come out to church on this day of all days? When we already know the whole story, including all its parts.

One answer to this question may be that we are drawn to power, and what could be more powerful than a man—a humble man, a caring man—who is killed by all the worst things—the betrayal of friends, the corrupt dealings of government, the corrupt dealings of religion—what could be more powerful than a man who is killed by all that, but then comes back to life 3 days later? It's not just that such stories inspire us to believe in the power of good over evil, but that such stories can fill us with a strong sense of personal power, making us feel like we should raise a banner in the name of Jesus and set out to conquer our enemies and take back the world, forgetting of course that those who have tried to use Jesus to do such things have never actually been named Jesus, though they have been the cause of holocausts, genocides, civil wars, gender bias, racial bigotry, and terror. I think of Adolf Hitler as one such person. One of the darkest times in history was when he stood up in front of his country, his government, and said, "We can't expect the churches and the Christians to carry the whole weight of ridding the world of what isn't Christian. We have to put the power of the government behind it." And so he persuaded the people to make the power of the government the power of the church and when the government started to do unspeakable horrors, people said, where's the church? Why doesn't the church speak out? But when they turned to find the church, the church wasn't there. No, if we've come to church today looking for power, we best look elsewhere.

Another reason for why maybe we've come to church today is that we really do want to see a dead person come back to life. I know that sounds crazy, but I tell you, it's not. Who in coming to church doesn't want to see a little magic show? Our lives are so busy. Go here, go there. We don't have 5 minutes for ourselves these days. And we all know the stories about people who used to go to church but then the church told them they couldn't get married again because they were already divorced, so they stopped going. Or how they were told their gay son or daughter was welcome in church, so long as they didn't act gay, because God doesn't approve of that, and because they didn't need a God, or a church, that only makes life harder than it already is, they just stopped going. So if you want me to come to church and to keep coming, you're going to have to win me over, do a little magic. And what better day to do that than on Easter? Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't know any magic. And despite what we think we know about today and

what's supposed to happen, we won't be raising any dead people. That doesn't surprise you, though, doesn't it? Again, totally predictable. We can't bring the dead back to life, and if you don't think it's for lack of trying why you should have been with me just yesterday. I was at the Swan Point Cemetery officiating a funeral in one of their lovely chapels, and after the service everyone went over to the grave site for the burial, and after the burial, as these things tend to go, the family lingered for a bit and that gave me a chance to look at some of the other gravestones. Swan Point is an old cemetery and there's a lot of gravestones with multiple names printed on them. "Here lies George Baker. 1890 - 1965." And below George's name it read, "His beloved wife..." along with the dates of her birth and death. And below her name it read, "Their beloved son..." and so on and so on. But one gravestone caught my attention especially. The first name at the top of the stone was a woman named Sabrina Mendez. Just underneath her name were inscribed the words, "Her mother, Caroline," and just below that, "Her Grandmother, Michelle." The ordering of the words struck me as so odd that I had to look again to see the dates listed for each person. Sabrina was born in August 2000. She died in August 2008. Her mother Caroline was born in August 1966 and her grandmother Michelle was born in December 1944. However, neither Sabrina's mother nor grandmother had any date listed for when they died. I walked over to the place where Sabrina alone and thought about the story in Mark's gospel where Jesus leans over the body of a little girl who is thought to be dead—her father says she's dead, her mother says she's dead, they're both weeping over her—and Jesus leans over her and whispers, "Little girl, get up." And the little girl does. So, I leaned over Sabrina and I whispered, I really did, "Little girl, get up. Your mother and grandmother are here." I mean, I've heard stories about people who say they died on the operating table. The doctors say the heart rate monitor cut to zero, then suddenly they're alive again. And I know the story about Jesus. He wasn't on any operating table, in surgery for 8 or 10 hours. He was in the ground, six feet under, for 3 whole days, and it's said that he came back. So, I whispered again, "Little girl, Sabrina, get up." But of course, nothing happened. Totally predictable.

We can't raise the dead. You know it. I know it. So what are we all doing here? What makes us all to show up, some of us just once a year *on this day*, to hear a story about the raising of the dead, a story that none of us can prove actually ever happened?

Maybe you already know this, but for everything we have done as a church to make this day totally predictable, the story of Easter is totally unpredictable. Just listen again to the way our gospel reading ended.

When the woman came to the tomb they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "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 they laid him. But 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." 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.

They left the tomb and said nothing. They did nothing. They ran in fear. I guess that's one way for us to do Easter this year. Leave here acting like nothing has changed, like death still has her grip on us, like the world is still a terrifying place.

Fortunately for us, Luke gives us a different way to go. In his version of the story, Luke says that after they left the tomb, they went for a walk, and along the way they met a stranger, and inviting the stranger to come in they sat down at the table and taking a loaf of bread, the stranger blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them to eat, and it was then that they realized the stranger was the risen Jesus.

I don't know if the dead can actually be raised to life again. I do know that just because we've showed up here again after another year, in our Sunday best, singing all the appropriate hymns and listening as best we can to the story of Jesus, and just because we're going to have an Easter egg hunt and eat ham, it doesn't mean it's Easter...not yet at least.

It may be that Easter will still come, maybe next year, maybe next week, maybe in 1 hour, maybe in 10 minutes, maybe in every minute of every day, maybe even now. In the words of Clarence Jordan, that great Southern Baptist preacher from Georgia who helped

found Habitat for Humanity and the Koinonia Community, “Easter comes not when the stone is rolled away, but when the church is carried away.” Carried away beyond its own walls and services to serve the poor; carried away beyond our culture of protectionism and fear to generosity; carried away with conviction to join the march for a better world; carried away with the extravagant, unpredictable sharing of bread with strangers.

It may be that Easter will still come. It may be that we will get to see the Risen Jesus. Let us make it so.