

Luke 24:13-35
"This Way to Easter"

April 19, 2020
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If you were with us last Sunday then you may remember how the Easter story ended. From Mark's gospel: Early in the morning on the first day of the week, some women go to the tomb of Jesus, carrying with them some spices they have bought to anoint his body with. Arriving at the tomb, however, they see that the stone—a very large stone—which was covering up the entrance, has been rolled away. They go into the tomb and there, a young man dressed in a white robe, tells them those most unbelievable words: "He is not here. Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified one, is not here. Do not be afraid. 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."

The man in the white robe wants to make clear, there shouldn't be any surprises here. It's all just as Jesus told you it would be. So don't be afraid by what you don't see. Go, tell the others all about it.

So they went out and fled the tomb, says Mark. And gripped by terror and amazement, they said nothing to anyone. They said nothing to anyone.

The reaction of the women on that first Easter morning reminds me of a short poem I read once:

*We shake with joy, we shake with grief.
What a time they have, these two
housed as they are in the same body.¹*

The women go to the tomb, they don't see Jesus there, they're told he has been raised, go tell the others about it, and they run away terrified and amazed, and say nothing to anyone. But I have to wonder if that's how it goes forever. Does there ever come a day when the

¹ Oliver, Mary (2017). "Devotions. The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver." New York, NY: Penguin Press, p. 70.

women do tell Peter and the disciples? Does their amazement ever grow to become more than their terror?

In all the other gospel accounts, Jesus himself eventually shows up on the scene, which helps to put their fears and doubts to rest. But in Mark's gospel, Jesus never shows up on or after Easter, and we are left to wonder how it all went for the women and the disciples. Of course, read Mark chapter 16 in your Bible and you'll see something called "The Shorter and Longer Endings of Mark," in which the women are heard making their report to Peter and the other disciples, followed by Jesus himself appearing to them.

Now what's going on here? It would seem that someone didn't like the way Mark's Easter edition ended, and so many years later they add an alternative (or is it just an extra?) ending, one that turns a cliffhanger into an epilogue.

I don't know which ending is right. I guess it doesn't really matter because the point is, each of us has to decide what to do with the news that Jesus is not in the grave. He is not where we left him. He has been raised back to life.

I wonder what you would have done had you been the one to show up at the tomb first on Easter morning to find it empty, or had you been the first one to hear from the women that Jesus was no longer dead but alive again.

In the story Krista, Kevin, and Olivia just read for us from Luke's gospel, there is a group of disciples who, upon hearing the news, decide to go out for a walk. Who knows maybe these are the same disciples who locked themselves behind closed doors in John's gospel. They heard that Jesus wasn't in the tomb, that he was back from the grave, and they thought, "Shoot, the people who put him there are not going to like this, and they're going to come for us now." Shut, lock, and bar the door. And there they all stayed together in self-quarantine and isolation. Or maybe not. Maybe a couple of them said, "We got to get out of here, go for a walk, get some fresh air."

There's a lesson in this for us, I believe. No question, practicing social distancing is the right and necessary thing for us to be doing right now, but there is a difference between being distant and being isolated. Distance means we are watching out for each other because we want to keep one another safe. Isolation means we are watching out for each other because we are afraid of one another. The first is an act of grace and mercy, the second, an act of prejudice and indecency. The second is also what got Jesus crucified and buried in a tomb.

"We don't like the sound of his preaching and the look of his ministry," the religiously instituted said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. I have not come to dine with the righteous but with the sinners. Let the little children come to me, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Who does this Jesus think he is? We know who the kingdom of God belongs to!"

So they get together with the powers of Rome and convince them that he and his misfit band of poor people are a threat to their power, that he is becoming more popular than the emperor himself, and he ought be isolated, and eliminated. They hang him on a cross and put him in a tomb, but 3 days later, in an act of extraordinary grace and mercy, he comes back. And he appears first to a couple of disciples who have decided that they too have had enough of the isolation, enough of the hiding out in fear. "We're going for a walk." A long walk Luke says, for it is 7 miles from Jerusalem, where they've been, to Emmaus, where they're going.

I wonder how many walks you're taking these days, and what your longest one has been lately. We've been told that when you're feeling isolated, when death feels like it's closing in on all sides, and you feel yourself growing more afraid, the best medicine is to go for a walk. It clears the mind and lifts the soul to go outside, or at least to move towards a window. Because when we get up and move, the lower back creaks a little, and the muscles, which are tired and asleep, cough a little. Like an old Chevy that has been sitting out in the garage for 20 years and one day we decide to rev it up, to see if there's any life left in it still, and in the process we discover there is some life also still left in us. When we

go for a walk, we can see how much of life is still going on. The birds aren't holed up in front of the TV, the squirrels, for as much as they are hiding acorns, they aren't hoarding them (I read this recently on the inside of a *Snapple* bottle cap, that squirrels hide their acorns in an effort to share their acorns. We'll call that Humanity 101.). And the flowers, the flowers are not asking the snowflakes to promise they won't come back if they should pop out of the ground.

The Persian poet Hafiz once wrote:

*After all this time
The Sun never says to the Earth
You owe me
Look what happens with a love like that,
It lights the whole sky*

I need to end this sermon, though not because this sermon is over, but because its ending belongs to you. It belongs to you to go for a walk now. To bear yourself out into the world, and see what can happen when you do as the disciples in our story did. To resist the powers of fear and isolation. To stand upright and tell your story with honesty—about what it's like to be you right now—the losses you've endured, the faith that is so hard to come by, and the hopes that keep you going. To share the story of you with whoever comes your way next, and to welcome the stranger when they do come along. To welcome them in whatever good way you can, remembering that to welcome the stranger—to take the broken bread they have to offer—is to see the world resurrected. My friends, it is time to go for a walk. To step out into the world and see it as a place filled with Easter hope and all the promises of new life coming about even now. Go.