

Palisades Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday
April 16, 2006

Reflection: "Do not abandon yourselves to despair. We are the Easter people and hallelujah is our song." By Pope John Paul II

Readings: Acts 10: 34 - 43
Mark 16: 1-8

Hymns: #163 Jesus Christ is Risen Today
#106 Alleluias, Alleluia! Give Thanks

We Are the Easter People, Indeed
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This morning, at the early sunrise service, we read a poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay called *Dirge Without Music*. It sets the tone, I think, for some of the comments I would like to make this morning.

I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise and the lovely. Crowned
With lilies and with laurel they go; but I am not resigned.

Lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you.
Be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust.
A fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,
A formula, a phrase remains - but the best is lost.

The answers, quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love -
They are gone. They are gone to feed the roses. Elegant and curled
Is the blossom. Fragrant is the blossom. I know. But I do not approve.
More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave
Gently they go, the beautiful, the tender, the kind;
Quietly they go, the intelligent, the witty, the brave.
I know. But I do not approve and I am not resigned.

Even in the most difficult of situations, we like Edna, are not resigned to believe that we are here, caught in some cosmic whirlwind, spinning, turning – only to evaporate lost into memory, time, and a distant lunacy. No we have come to believe, often in spite of ourselves, that there is a God and that presence lay our ultimate completion.

No, Edna, with you we are not resigned and on this Easter Sunday it is in this assurance that death has been conquered that we gather. Now, I know this sounds just a tad bit too traditional for even me, but as I prepared these remarks for my first Easter Sunday services as a minister – as I let the depth of my own being inform my thoughts – above all, this was there: that Jesus has somehow raised -- to a conscious level -- the connection, the complement we share with the eternal. This eternal, for me, is captured best by the ancient term Shekinah: that is the shimmering, glittering presence of God in all things – all things.

We are at the limen, the threshold of this life and the next in all we do and at all times. Most of us, if not all of us, have had some experience with this proximity to God's presence in ways that can leave us wondering what just happened. The stunning sunrise or sunset, the song or piece of art that brings us to tears; the stroke of a pen leaving behind a combination of words that came from where?; the wonder of a child's birth; or the sacred suspended moments in being present for the slow decline of a loved one. In all these and more there is present God and the promise. And, it is not always joyful.

Easter did not start out with lilies and chocolates and Easter eggs. It emerged from a tomb. The first Easter started in a tomb and for many around the world -- this day is a reminder that even in great and present adversity, pain, and confusion – even there is the healing presence and hope of the one who conquered death. From that moment of consciousness stirred 2000 years ago – death, as we know it has changed, and it no longer has any power over us. Yes, it may leave us reeling, hurt, lonely, disoriented, and more – as it should, but life is never over in God's presence – for there is no death in God, only life.

Mark's gospel that we read this morning reflects the truth that transition to the eternal is not always a gentle happening. Here's how the Rev. Susan Andrews, former Moderator of the General Assembly put it in her Easter sermon from 2003: "Of all the resurrection accounts, Mark's is the shortest, the oddest, the saddest, the starkest. But this is true of Mark's whole gospel - this earliest account of Jesus's life - where there is no birth narrative, no Beatitudes, no stories about weddings or friendship meals, no elegant touching by a sensuous woman, and absolutely no appearance stories of a resurrected Lord. The Gospel of Mark opens with the words: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ..." But the gospel ends with the words: "they were afraid," What's so good about fear?"

Indeed, Jenna read it for us a few minutes ago: “So they went and they fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone for they were afraid.”

That’s the way the gospel according to Mark ends.

But isn’t that the way life really is, sometimes? Terror: that deeply rooted automatic reaction of human fear when faced with something that instantly threatens everything: a blinding paralyzing reaction that responds as if every cell in our body suddenly flooded the circuitry of the brain, firing electrical impulses – overloading the system, with no assurance it would be able to reboot back to operating mode?

For Mary Magdalene and Mary, the Mother of James and Salome, already weary and numbed by seeing Jesus tortured and crucified as a common criminal – for them, in that stupor, acting on automatic as we often do following tragic losses, focusing on taking care of the traditions, such as anointing the body – think of the shock they felt on first seeing the empty tomb.

Where’s the body? What did they do with it? Is it at the dump or have some of Pilate’s henchmen come to desecrate it more...” Tears! Terror! Sheer terror at what had happened, and then more terror at what was going to happen next.

And then there’s this man in white clothing, sitting there.

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.

Right, “Do not be alarmed.” C’mon, they must have been petrified and amazed – to the point of disbelief any of it was happening, and in a state of logical and understandable fear they ran and hid and told no one, for what would they say and who would believe them? You would think angels would know better.

Yet, these are the things of Easter sermons, linking the gospels, the stories, and the people with our own times. Embracing what is the spiritual reality of resurrected presence (a vapor of soul-stuff, as David Means refers to it in his piece in this month’s Harpers) - versus resurrected body, body and soul intact.

Dominic Croissan former Catholic priest and now author says it this way, if in fact Jesus rose bodily on that day long ago – well, it was a very good day for him; but what does it mean for us? How does the resurrection of 2000 years ago have an impact today?

Susan Andrews, once again:

The great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr always turned down invitations to preach on Easter. Instead he chose to sit in the pews of one of the more liturgical churches - an Episcopal church or a Roman Catholic Church. Why? Because there the worship would focus on stirring music and festive sacraments, with little sermon to speak of. After all, Niebuhr said, he did not want “to be subjected to some preacher making a fool of himself [or herself] trying to explain the resurrection.” (P.C..Enniss, **Journal for Preachers**, Easter 2003) My friends, though I may make a fool of myself, I am not here this morning to “explain the resurrection.” All I can do is proclaim the resurrection - and then let you respond with whatever conviction, whatever feeling, whatever yearning God has placed in your heart.

Please know that therein lies the greatest of truths – your own yearnings that God has placed in your heart. Let those speak more loudly than the debate. Let them be resurrected as the Jesus you know is resurrected in your own life.

The other gospels and history tell us what happened after Mark’s gospel ended. This dispersed frightened, awed and amazed band of followers of Jesus began to tell the story of the empty tomb and the appearances of Jesus. Word spread and, well, in a way, here we are today. Sifting layers of time and culture and rewrites – seeking meaning and truth. Maybe that’s one of the reasons I like Mark’s gospel so much. Its brevity and coarseness seems to make it a little easier, more like the world I know. And there are some important things he tells us.

The angel, for example. Calm, assuring, approachable – “Do not be alarmed.” Almost as if to say to us, it will all be fine. Even if it doesn’t seem that way now. Chill a little. Relax, this is the good news.

And the angel’s instructions to tell the disciples and Peter. Peter was mentioned by name. Peter, the one who three times denied he was a follower of Jesus. “The rock upon which the church would be built, was, at first, someone who denied Jesus. Yet, here, he has been forgiven. All has been forgotten. In the death and raising of Jesus there is no place for recrimination for those who were with him, those who made mistakes.

One wonders, especially in light of the Gospel of Judas, if this included him. Somehow, I think it does. Maybe that’s a little bit of self-preservation, following the thinking that if Judas can be forgiven – certainly, anything I might do can be forgiven as well – for, I too, know what it is like to move away from God,

And lastly for this morning, the angel sends the women back to Galilee, the place of Nazareth where Jesus was born, the lowly section of this geography once referred to as a place where nothing good could be found.

Galilee, they were not sent on to the seats of power, but to the place where it had begun, to their homes, to their friends, family, and dusty streets to continue the work of the Easter people.

And so it is for us. Here we are with one another on this morning, in the presence of the risen Jesus, with the assurance of forgiveness, and the tasks at our hands to be done faithfully in the name of the one whose teachings we follow.

Even at moments of terror and amazement, temporarily frozen by fear, be assured that as the brain and blood start to flow again, and as we gain our regular breathing and heart – the calm, the peace, the hope, the strength will be there.

We are the Easter people, that is, death no longer holds us in its eternal grasp. Rather, it is but a transition to a reunion beyond anything we can imagine. And in the meantime, we remain here in the Galilee of our times with work to do. With ups and downs, terror and sometimes amazement, but never alone.

Do not be alarmed. He who was crucified has gone before you and ahead of you. Go, to Galilee, tell the people the Good News, care for one another, and know you will see him as promised.

And, as so many times before, this morning looking out at you, I see the risen and present Jesus – in all of you – risen and present indeed.

Happy Easter, my sisters and brothers.