

*Easter Sunday 2006**

Acts 10:34-43; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11; Mark 16:1-8

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Happy Resurrection Day! May the news of Christ's risenness touch the dead spots in your heart and bring them back to life, so that you become part of the good news that flows forth from this place today. May you be springs of living water in all the dry places on this sweet, parched earth. May the fresh life that God has given you spill over to freshen all the lives that touch yours—in your homes, in your work, in your schools and neighborhoods. May you be Easter people, this day and forever.

I have probably over-thought this sermon. Easter is a tough preaching gig, especially for a guest like me. Good Friday is a much easier assignment, all in all—because most people are far more familiar with suffering and death than they are with resurrection. Resurrection is so difficult from so many angles that most Christians are content to think of it as something that happens after we die. God raised Jesus from the dead and took him to heaven. Because we believe in Jesus, God will do the same thing for us.

So far, so good. But if that is the best we can do, then today becomes the day we thank God for what will happen when our lives are over, and Christian faith becomes the faith of those who care less for life than afterlife. I would have called this an exaggeration until I heard one of my Religion 101 students say it in plain English. "I love studying other religions," she said, "because they have so much in them about how to live. This is different from Christianity, which is about going to heaven when you die."

When theologian Harvey Cox taught a class called "Jesus and the Moral Life" at Harvard College, he left the resurrection off his syllabus. One reason was because he had students from a wide variety of religious traditions in his class. Another reason was because the resurrection "stood on the borderline between the historical and the mystical."¹ Only the faithful saw the risen Christ, and not even all of them. Faith was a prerequisite to the resurrection, and not all of his students had it. So Cox ended his course with the crucifixion, spending the last few sessions of the class discussing some of the different takes on the moral significance of Jesus' life that have arisen in the centuries after his death.

The class was hugely popular, growing every year until Cox finally had to move the class to a theatre usually reserved for rock concerts. His students pressed him, however, and not just the Christians. They wanted to know why Cox was leaving out the climax of the story, the part that made Jesus different from Moses, Muhammad, or the Buddha. Listening to them talk, he discovered that the closest parallels some of them had for Jesus' resurrection were the stories of Dracula or the Terminator. So he decided to add the resurrection to his syllabus, but not before he had done his own research.

* This sermon was preached at Cannon Chapel, Emory University, on April 16, 2006.

Chief among his surprises was the discovery that stories of raising the dead in the Hebrew Bible *have nothing to do with immortality*. They are about *God's justice*. "They did not spring up from a yearning for life after death," he writes, "but from the conviction that ultimately a truly just God simply [has] to vindicate the victims of the callous and the powerful."² To restore a dead person to life is to strike a blow at mortality, Cox points out, but to restore a *crucified* man to life is to strike a blow at the system that executed him.

This changes the way today's story reads—or not, for those who do not want God getting mixed up with politics. But Cox is right about the Hebrew Bible, which is the Bible Jesus grew up on. He is also right about what resurrection meant in Jesus' own time, which struck Paul with oracular force on the road to Damascus. For God to bring a dead man back to life meant that God's reign was very near. And if God's reign was very near, then the reign of the callous and the powerful was very over, in truth if not in fact. For anyone who could read the signs, an empty tomb was the signal that God's justice was on the move—not just in heaven, but right here on earth.

So of course the women were scared when they saw the stone rolled away from the tomb. They had come to conduct a funeral, not a revolution. They had come to grieve, not to organize.

Even if they were not up on their messianic theology, they knew they had lost more than their beloved friend. They had also lost their best hope for a new kind of life on earth.

When Jesus was alive, it had been possible for them to imagine a world in which children had enough to eat, sick people got well, and old people did not have to worry about who would care for them once they could no longer care for themselves. When he spoke, it had been possible to imagine a world in which women were worth talking to, lepers could retire their bells, and people with nothing in the middle of nowhere could find themselves at a picnic for five thousand, with twelve baskets to spare.

It had even been possible to imagine a world with no Romans in it—patrolling the streets in their metal breastplates and pointy helmets, barking their orders, demanding their taxes. If God was in charge, then God had a funny way of showing it. For all practical purposes, Caesar was Lord—keeping peace through military power, using fear to stay in control. There were benefits of course, at least for those who supported the imperial agenda, but the problem with eating at the emperor's table was that you got addicted to his rich food.

When Jesus was alive, he showed up with his own food—nothing fancy, just some stale loaves and dried fishes. While they were chewing it, he said things that made them chew quietly enough to hear him—speaking of peace through *justice*, using love to *yield* control. Well, people noticed. Unlike the other Lord, he was not armed. Unlike the other Lord, he told people *not* to fear. Yet when he spoke, his words rang with such authority that demons fled, faint hearts revived, and even those dead sat up to take another look around.

This was such good news that there was no way to shut up about it. He was the one they had been waiting for. With evidence like that, who could doubt it? When the time was right, he would act *decisively*—to set things right again. He would send the conquerors home to beat their swords into plowshares. He would wipe away the tears from all faces. He would destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples and swallow up death forever.

That was the hope, at least, but when Lord Caesar's people heard the news, it sounded anything but good to them. Who wanted a plowshare? They had not gotten where they were by putting their trust in farm tools. They put their trust in swords. So they sent some people with swords to arrest the Lord Jesus—who did not have one of his own, of course—and by the next afternoon he was dead. End of news.

When the women came to anoint his body, they were not just coming to mourn their dead friend, then. They were coming to mourn their dead hope. They were coming to bury the dead future he had helped them imagine, to lay to rest their dead vision of the way things might have been. Story over. We are *all* dead now.

According to Mark, the first clue the women had that the funeral was not going to happen was that the tomb stone was not where it was supposed to be. They had been worried about who was going to move it for them. Maybe they even hoped that no one would, so that they could go back home and say they had tried to get in without actually having to go in.

It was a dangerous place for them to be seen, after all, at the tomb of a folk hero executed by the state. If they had listened harder, they might have heard camera shutters clicking in the bushes for the wanted posters that would go up later that afternoon. If the Committee on Un-Roman Activities wanted to wipe out the rest of the nest, all they had to do was follow the women back home. The two Marys and Salome might as well have been wearing t-shirts that said, "This way to the men folk." But they were not that scared yet. They were not *really* scared until they ducked inside the tomb and saw the young man dressed in white sitting there.

"Do not be alarmed," he said, because they were so *clearly* 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."

Now *that* is news, though you are not likely to read it in the *Imperial Times*. Lord Caesar has failed to silence Lord Jesus. The crucified one has been raised. The dead one is not here. He has gone ahead to Galilee—back to where the story began—to begin the buzz all over again.

Those who want to see him will not stay in the tomb trying to verify what did or did not happen there, any more than they will fold their hands and turn their gaze toward heaven. The young man in white does not say that Jesus is going ahead of them to heaven; he says that Jesus is going ahead of them to Galilee. *God's hope is alive on earth*. That is what the women are supposed to go tell the disciples and Peter.

But they do not, or at least not according to the oldest version of Mark's gospel. In that version, which we heard all the way to the last verse today, the women "fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." In Greek, the ending is even more abrupt: "And no one anything they told," it reads, "they were scared, you see, for..."

For what?! There's a whole new *Da Vinci Code* waiting to be written about how such an ending came to be. Did Mark slump over his manuscript at that point, dead himself from a sudden heart attack? Did a Roman soldier walk up behind him and say, "You're done, son"? Maybe those who inherited Mark's manuscript were so appalled by what he had written that they ripped it off right there, right in the middle of that sentence, and pretended that was all there was to it. Or maybe Mark was simply a brilliant storyteller, the James Joyce of his generation, willing to take linguistic risks

that no one else dreamed of taking. “They were scared, you see, for....”

You know what you are scared of, don’t you?

They were scared, you see, for as wrecked as they were by Jesus’ death, they knew how to behave in the face of death. You view the body, you seal the tomb, you go back to the house to eat fried chicken and green bean casseroles with the neighbors. You accept that there is no going back and you get on with your life, diminished as it is. But when the tomb is empty and the body is gone? How do you get closure on something like that?

They were scared, you see, for they did not know how to behave in the face of death’s undoing.”

They were scared, you see, for even though they had caught Jesus’ vision and given themselves to following him, they were still stuck with this guilty relief they felt when they realized how many things they did not have to *do, believe, or hope* anymore. In a lot of ways, hope is harder than death. At least with death you can stop trying so hard. *They were scared, you see, for* they were pretty sure they did not want to move mountains again.

They were scared, you see, for if he was risen from the dead, then so were they. Lord Caesar could go on governing by the same tired rules—might makes right, strike before you are struck, watch your back and let others watch theirs—but they did not have to live like that anymore. Death had lost its grip on them. They were going to be harder to control now that they knew what limited damage violence could do to God’s cause. *They were scared, you see, for* they had never been fearless before, and all of a sudden there was nothing to hold them back.

Mark did not know exactly what we would be scared of all these years later; he just knew we would be. By ending his gospel right there, right in the middle of a sentence, he also left us free to decide what to do about it. Will we tell or won’t we? Will we go to Galilee or won’t we? That is where the Lord Jesus has gone—not to the town in northern Israel, but to all the real places on earth that we have come here from—where we bring up our children, earn our livings, pay our taxes, cast our votes. That is where God is raising the dead. If we want to practice resurrection, then that is where we will go too.

Because we clearly need more practice. Death may be beat, but death has not hit the ground yet. Lord Caesar may be gone, but his successors are not out of business yet. That is why we need this meal we are about to share, to remind us that the Christ who died, the Christ who is risen, is the Christ who will come again. Meanwhile, God’s hope is alive on earth. Though wounded, peace lives. Though killed, justice rises. Though buried, love goes ahead of us to Galilee; there we will see him, just as he told us.

Notes

1. Harvey Cox, *When Jesus Came to Harvard* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 271.
2. Cox, 274.