

Easter Sunday, 2021

Mark 16:1-8

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Where is the body of the risen Jesus? We do not get to see the body. Nobody does in Mark's gospel. In the other accounts, Jesus arrives to grant peace to the disciples and give words of encouragement and even have a bite to eat. Not so in Mark. We must depend upon the words of the messenger at the tomb; we must trust the women who received the message. We could do far worse, by the way, than to trust these women. After all, they had gone to care for the body of Jesus with steadfast love, washing and tending to it, thereby showing themselves to be faithful. But neither they nor we get to see the body of the Risen Jesus.

And then, there is the song that we don't get to hear. It's a psalm, actually. It is introduced by an often-overlooked line in Mark's gospel, which appears also in Matthew and Luke, that goes like this, "When they had sung the hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives." You will recognize that from the Last Supper. The meal was over, and the hymn was sung. But they didn't sing just any old hymn. They sang the same hymn that is sung at the end of every seder meal, Psalm 136. That psalm has 26 verses, and, in every verse, we hear this: "*God's steadfast love endures forever.*" "Give thanks to the Lord, for the Lord is good. *Gods steadfast love endures forever*, who by wisdom made the heavens, *God's steadfast love endures forever*, who divided the Red Sea in two, *God's steadfast love endures forever*, who led the people through the wilderness....*God's steadfast love endures forever.*"

That's the hymn that was sung before Jesus' arrest. It is the song that we do not get to hear, but which nevertheless echoes throughout the passion and resurrection of Jesus, Gods steadfast love endures forever.

So, no, we don't see Jesus' body, nor do we hear this hymn. All we are given is this: "He is risen, he is not here. But go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him...." Okay, but why not linger a while? Greet the disciples, have a meal? In the Gospel of Mark, that is not Jesus' style. To get a glimpse of the risen Jesus, to get a measure of God's steadfast love, we are invited to be on the way, beginning again. Maybe that's because, raised from the grave, Jesus gets right to work, raising others from the dead.

Like Ron, a young man struggling with alcoholism, who could not stay sober, and when he drank, could not resist getting behind the wheel of a car. He was arrested, arrested again, and continued to struggle with being possessed by alcohol. He was incarcerated for a good chunk of time, locked in jail and locked in his own shame. But then he met some people who fervently believe the word of the women at the tomb, for whom these words, "He is risen!" have actually raised *them* from the dead. And they took this young man under their wings and into their hearts until he experienced what they had experienced, a release from the vault of shame and from the bondage of addiction. Now he himself has joined this band of disciples, on the way to Galilee, starting over with his life and calling others who are in the same bondage that he knew so well, to join him and his fellow travelers on the way. If you

knew him before, you would not recognize him now. That is our resurrected Jesus at work. Sorry, no time to stop and chat; there are others who need to be raised from the dead.

Steve, for instance, a Vietnam vet, came to Honorable Welcome Home, which, as many of you know, is our ministry to veterans of war. Veterans come to Lake Chelan for four days. We house and feed them and accompany them in whatever activities they choose in this lovely valley. We hear their stories and give them a non-judgmental environment in which to process the guilt and shame that has been eating them up for decades. Most importantly of all, they hear a word of forgiveness for what they were convinced was unforgivable. Steve came through Honorable Welcome Home a while back. I saw him again sometime later, and he told me how much his time in Chelan had meant to him. He told me, "After coming to Chelan, I have felt better than I have in forty years." I said, "That is wonderful." He said, "Ya know, we had some friends over for dinner the other night." I said, "Yeah?" Now I'm waiting for the story, wondering what had happened at the dinner party, but nothing comes. Finally, Steve looked at me and said, "You don't get it, do you?" "Apparently not!" I laughed. He smiled, but then with all seriousness, he said to me, "Paul, that's the first time in forty years that I have had anyone but my own family in my house. And next week, we are going to their house." Raised from the dead, freed from a mountain of guilt and shame, a lifetime of not trusting others and feeling undeserving of even a simple shared meal with friends. Jesus at work raising the dead.

But no time to stand around, Jesus is going back to the beginning, back to Galilee and even further back. I want you to look at the bulletin cover, the Icon of the Resurrection. This is Jesus in the middle, hands grasping two people, raising them up, one on his left and one on his right. We have heard that phrase recently, huh? The two criminals hung, one on his left and one on his right. The icon is not of that pair, however. It is Adam and Eve, being raised from the dead by the hands of Jesus. Because the promise, "God's steadfast love endures forever," is not just that God's steadfast love endures from now on, which is great enough, but because, Lord have mercy, you know we have had a hard year, and we don't know that next year is going to be any better, so sure, let us walk into the future hearing "God's steadfast love endures forever!"

But let us also be aware that "forever" goes not only forward into the future, but also into the past, including all that we have regretted, all that we have felt guilty about, all that we have locked away in a vault of shame over the years. Jesus breaks open the vault, grabs us by the arms, and raises us out of the grave of guilt and shame and regret. God's steadfast love claims even this. "My steadfast love endures forever; it was here when you locked all these things up and it will remain forever." For Steve and Ron, and maybe even for this congregation gathered on Easter morning.

For as we are all painfully aware, over the past eighteen months the various opinions and practices around covid have taken their toll on our congregation. We have been locked in both resentment and deep regret over the division of the body. Several people have left to worship elsewhere, some for good and others until we decide to gather inside the church. Beth is in the latter camp. Since we are still worshipping outdoors, I was surprised to see her at the door of the church this morning, flowers in her arms. As I came to greet her, she made it clear: "I am not coming to church this morning, because I decided I am not coming back until we worship inside, and I

am sticking to my guns on that.” Me being a stubborn Sicilian, I knew how she felt, and my own stubbornness started to rise up to meet hers. But Beth was still talking: “Someone asked me to bring flowers, and so I am bringing flowers.” Immediately, I was disarmed by this lovely gesture, and I got a glimpse. “Beth, let me tell you how I interpret this gift of flowers. By this gift, I think you are saying that you still don’t agree with us worshipping outdoors, you haven’t changed your mind about that. But you want us to know that you still love us. Is that right?” And tears came to her eyes, and she said, “Yes, exactly.” And then I said, speaking for us all, “And we feel the very same way about you, Beth. We love you, too. And we are eager to be together again.”

Right there at the door of the church, Jesus was busy raising us both from the dead, from mutual animosity and resentment to tearful and loving embrace. So maybe the things we do not get to see or hear in the story of Mark’s resurrection are here to be lived out. The body of Christ, reconciling, the promise of God’s steadfast love enduring through struggle, controversy, and hostility, until all are raised from the tomb of resentment and division and shame, like Ron and Steve, like Adam and Eve, like two stubborn people at the door of the church, raised up to new life and enduring love.