

Easter Year B 2024

The Gospel reading appointed for Easter this year is from Mark. Mark is the darkest of the Gospels, riddled with irony, paradox... its prose edgy. God tends to show up in paradox; in life's edginess. You'll remember that there is no resurrection appearance in Mark. There's no raised Jesus in this Gospel, only a mysterious young man sitting in the empty tomb announcing to the women (the men have fled) that Jesus has been raised from the dead. The women react ambivalently They react with both awe and fear. The last line of this Gospel is, "They said nothing to anyone for they were afraid." The word for afraid in the Greek is nuanced; it can mean both awe and fear... a paradox, true to Mark's style, here at the very end of mark's narrative. Matthew, Luke, and John rewrite the ending of Mark. They don't like it. Matthew and Luke claim that a glowing angel of God is there at the empty tomb. Luke, the more literary, the more dramatic, describes an angel descending from heaven and rolling away the stone from the mouth of the grave. John has the risen Jesus himself standing just outside the tomb making the startling announcement of the Resurrection.

So what do we make of Mark's account; after all, as far as we know, his Gospel is the earliest, the original, as it were. And who is this young man, not an angel... but a young man, a mere human, chosen as witness to an event that will

change utterly the world. You may recall, we've seen this young man before in the narrative. He appears as an "extra," if you will, a "rude mechanical," as Shakespeare would put it. His appearance is brief, a cameo appearance, hardly noticeable. Just a few paragraphs before this scene at the tomb, we are told, as Jesus is being arrested, that a young man who was following Jesus, is stripped of his clothes by the police, and that he runs away naked, shamed like all the rest of Jesus's fellowship. The word for young man in the Greek is exactly the same as that for the young man at the tomb. And the audience is hearing them in close proximity.

In the early church, according to the Didache, a Second Century document of moral teaching and liturgical practice for the early church... People would prepare for baptism for at least forty days before Easter. They would gather at a river or stream (the Didache prescribed "living water," water that is moving) and they would enter the water naked (I'm guessing politely or symbolically naked....) And after being baptized by a bishop or presbyter of the church they would be clothed in 'white linen.' We know that Mark's theme is principally concerned with Baptism. We know that because the prologue of Mark is about the baptism of Jesus. So, I want to suggest that the young man at the empty tomb is an initiate, one of the newly baptized, one who has been given the sacrament of new birth. And more than that, he has been given dignity in place of his shame. He is witness

to, and the one to proclaim, the mystery of the resurrection... and he points, with all authority, the disciples to Galilee... Where it all began; back to the place of ministry, a forgotten place in a lost corner of the world, a place like so many in our world, marginalized, left to fend for itself.

So I want to ask a question. It is the same question that the women on their way to the tomb ask of each other: "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?" We're not told in the narrative; but I think we know... It is the young man... one of the baptized... And that begs the question: Who put the stone there in the first place? The whole of Mark's Gospel leads inevitably to Jesus's execution. Walter Brueggemann, venerable scholar, calls this Gospel, "an epiphany of injustice." Jesus is misunderstood from the beginning, perhaps willfully misunderstood. The powers that be see him as a threat to their authority; they see him as a threat to the status quo. Evil will always oppose the engendering of Love. Evil knows that love is a formidable force, and it will do anything to stop it. So it is the system, the state, corrupted by power... the Roman hierarchy, the complicit Jewish vassals living in opulence granted by their very oppressors. Jesus is executed by the power of the system, the power of injustice, the power of self-interest. It is the system that seals the tomb with hatred as hard as stone. And the system persists, rolling stones into the pathways of life.

“Who will roll away the stone from the entrance of the tomb?” Who will roll away the stone of racism, the stone of white supremacy that is embedded in our system? Who will roll away the stone for the incarcerated who’ve served their time, but are prevented by the system to ever live a productive and dignified life? The stone stands at the entrance to opportunity and dignity and life itself. Who will roll away the stone from the voting booth? Who will roll away the stone of poverty that forces a life not unlike death? Who will roll away the stone of genocide, still perpetrated by the powers and principalities of this world. Our system, the system, is a system of stones.

Brothers and sisters, the Gospels at their heart are about liberation... rolling away the stone from the tomb of the enslavement to evil. Resurrection is not a singular event in biblical history, but a practice of setting the dead of our world free; free to live into their true humanity, a life of creativity, a life of dignity and well-being... into their very God-likeness. “Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb? It is us... good people... It is us who have been buried with Christ to the sin of injustice, the sins of the system; and have been raised to a life of advocacy and activism. Resurrection life is love in action, plain and simple... and Love is stronger than evil and injustice. Love is stronger than death. Love is all there is, and there is no stone that Love can’t move.

The young man at the tomb, a mere extra.... He's one of us, bidding us in sacred solidarity to do the work of love, the work of resurrection; to challenge the powers that be that shame and deceive and oppress.... He bids us to heal, to include, to embrace the unloved and the voiceless among us.... To our surprise, resurrection appearances abound in Mark's Gospel. Not at the empty tomb, but among the poor and the sick and the marginalized. We are compelled to look into our daily lives for the raising up of those who suffer death in life. We do our work trusting the promise that Love will triumph in the end. That is what we celebrate in this Holiest of seasons in the church: Love's triumph; Love's victory. In every act of love the stone at the entrance of the tomb is rolled away, and the dead are raised to life. Christ is risen, and therein is the hope of all the crucified of our world. Ours, good people, is to make it so.