

We Are Called to Be an Eastering Presence

Mark 16:1-8

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This sermon was preached on Easter Sunday 2015 at Lake Shore Presbyterian Church in Jacksonville, Florida. Tim died two days later as a result of metastatic kidney cancer.

This is one of the most interesting passages in all of Scripture about Easter. It is actually my favorite, and I will tell you why in a few minutes. It has disturbed the church since the earliest days. We know this, because there were at least three, if not more, attempts to write different endings onto the Gospel of Mark. Ending the Gospel on the word *phobeo*, afraid, seemed somehow blasphemous or inappropriate, so somebody got the bright idea that we've got to get a committee together to re-write this thing, because this ending just isn't going to work. Somebody said, we need to put a better spin on this.

Of course, the most famous of those spins wound up in the King James Version with that whole lovely ending: And you shall handle snakes, and you shall drink poison, and you shall be fine. Unfortunately, a lot of people didn't get the memo that that was not part of the original ending of the Gospel of Mark, and they played with the snakes or drank the poison and ended up going to meet their maker a lot sooner than they should have.

But the Gospel ends on this note, and I think it's wonderful, even though, in the church, we try to get out of it. We are much happier with the story in the twentieth chapter of the Gospel of John where Jesus meets Mary Magdalene in the garden. That's the one that everybody is comforted by. So, usually, we read that one on Easter. But, sorry, you picked the wrong Easter to come to church. You get the Gospel of Mark's ending.

But I think it's instructive. It's useful for our discipleship that it ends like this, because I think the women have a point. You go to this guy's execution. You see him hanging there dead on the cross. You see him pulled down from that awful place, a bloody mess, torn to pieces. You see him put in a tomb, and three days later, there's a guy standing at his grave saying: Oh, he's not here. He's alive. And he's called a meeting at the Starbucks in Galilee for later this afternoon. You all go on ahead, and I'll meet you there later.

Man, you'd just get in your car and go home. You'd say, I'm not even going to go there. Because if that guy is alive, if that guy is not dead anymore, and the dead are raised, my goodness, what else in the world is going to happen? What else am I going to be facing today? And you might just want to go back home, take another Ambien, crawl under the covers, go to sleep, and hope that you don't wake up until late in the evening, because you might have to give up a lot of things, a lot of preconceived notions about what is going on in the world. If the dead aren't going to remain in their tombs, then everything may be about to change, because that is precisely how the Scripture presents the resurrection of Jesus.

I've told you before, I preach the same sermon every year on Easter about Walter

Brueggemann's suggestion that we consider *Easter* a verb. I know you forget it around the fall of every year, so I bring it up again every spring.

The notion that Easter is a verb, that God is in the business of Eastering, if you take that seriously, then, my goodness, the things that you imagine going on in the world aren't really going to last. If the dead aren't going to remain in their tombs, then maybe the poor aren't going to stay poor. Maybe the sick aren't going to stay sick. Maybe the disenfranchised aren't always going to be that way. Maybe the empires of the world that seem to rule and have their sway for decades and generations and seem to be here for time and eternity, maybe they're not going to last. That is what the Scripture has to say about God's Eastering activity, and, if you really take that seriously, you might just be a little bit afraid. You might just be a little anxious about giving up some of those things, because we, in the church, live in the same world that everybody else does. And thus we live with the same assumptions about the poor and the sick and the dying and the empires and the big businesses. And we imagine that the world is always going to be this way, just like everybody else.

Except that we've had this encounter with an empty tomb, and that empty tomb has changed, for us, everything. We don't just see the possibilities of the world as it is. We see the possibilities of the world as it might be through the prism of God's Eastering activity in Jesus Christ. Thus, we have a challenge before us this Easter, as we do every Easter. That is, to see the world in this new light, this new activity that God is doing in the world, and believe that it might, in fact, be real.

What I think has happened is the church has built a kind of firewall around Easter, so that we're willing to accept that Jesus is raised from the dead. I mean, on the liturgical calendar, we have to have Easter, so we're willing to buy that. And we're willing to imagine that that Eastering activity might be good for us, because when we think about our own deaths, and, believe me, I've thought a lot about mine in the last year, so this has been extremely comforting to me, we're happy to accept that God is going to Easter us, and we're not going to be left in the grave. And that eternal life is possible for us, as it was for Jesus Christ. But, after that, we kind of build a firewall, so that Easter has to do with Jesus and with us going to heaven. But most of the rest of the time, we still imagine that the world is still the way that the world is. So, when we look at a situation, like the Israel-Palestine crisis, when we look at the racism in Ferguson, Missouri, or we look at the intractable problems in our own city that we have been working on through ICARE and other forms for years, we look at those, and we imagine that those are always going to be the same, that God's Eastering activity stops there. And we don't allow our faith to spill over into those other places where God wants to be an Eastering presence, and where God intends to use you and me as such Eastering presences out there in the world.

Sisters and brothers, we have been touched by that empty tomb not just to get us into glory. We've been touched by that empty tomb to be an agent of change in the world spreading the good news that, in fact, Easter happened, and it is God's good intention for the entire world to be Eastered, not just Jesus Christ, not just you and me in our personal salvation, but the whole of creation God intends to be Eastered. Sisters and brothers, the invitation for you and me this Easter is to take that call seriously and to believe, in fact, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. If you believe that, it has tangible implications for your life and for mine. Easter is what brings this church together. This is a new community, not built around race, not built around

any social or economic affiliation, not built around demographic characteristics. This community was called into being as a new community of hope gathered around the love of God and the love of neighbor, believing that Easter should flow out from this place, out from this body of people, out into the world around us. Sisters and brothers, that is the call of God to us this Easter, and that is the invitation to us: that we see our lives through the prism of Easter, that we see our mission as a congregation called to be an Eastering people. Having been Eastered ourselves, we are called to Easter others and take that good news out into the world. Sisters and brothers, Christ is risen, the tomb is empty, life is available, God's transformation is for everyone and everything. May God help us to live into that promise this day and everyday, as we await the coming of the resurrection in all of its forms.