

April 4, 2021 Easter Sunday

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Mark 16:1-8

"What Shall We Fear?"

Douglas T. King

"So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." *The Great Gatsby*, F.Scott Fitzgerald

"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens

"Max stepped into his private boat and waved goodbye and sailed back over a year and in and out of weeks and through a day and into the night of his very own room where he found his supper waiting for him—and it was still hot." *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak

These are all excellent endings to books. The ending to the book of the Gospel of Mark has received more mixed reviews over the years. At some point in time an industrious scribe or two, actually added on to the ending in an effort to improve it. But we just heard the original ending to the gospel, "So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them; and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid."

I suppose that should not be too surprising. Just about whenever someone in the Bible finds themselves before an angelic messenger, the first thing they are told is "Do not be afraid" or in this case "Do not be alarmed." And given how intense that experience must be, it makes complete sense that they would be afraid.

Rabbi Alan Lew explains that there are two words for "fear" in the Hebrew language, "pachad" and "norah." "Pachad refers to projected or imagined fear." In other words the kind of fears you have of the monsters under your bed when you are a child. "Norah is a very different kind of fear." It refers to what happens when we recognize the powerful presence of God in our midst. "The nearness of God is an experience of an intensity, an energy, and sense of spaciousness we are not accustomed to and it occasions a mixture of fear and awe." (Lew pp. 116-117) So we are left with only two kinds of fear. Pachad are the imaginary fears that limit our lives. And Norah is the fear and awe of the Lord which arrives and challenges us to open our lives to a greater depth and width than we have ever known. Yes, obviously we do have fears in our lives that are based in reality, but to what do they really amount when we are brought before the powerful presence of our God?

It is clear what kind of fear those women at the tomb were experiencing. The death of Jesus was a tragedy of epic proportions. But it was also something they understood. Death is a sad reality we have just learned to accept. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome knew how to respond to death. They arrived at the tomb with spices, ready to anoint Jesus' body. There were proscribed rituals to be followed and comfort to be found in following them. They could

not prevent Jesus' death but there was some sense of control to be had in engaging in the rituals they had been given.

The stone they feared moving had already been rolled aside. But in the tomb they do not find Jesus' body. They are received by a messenger in white who announces to them, "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here."

The messenger must have sensed their amazement and disbelief so he offers some evidence. "Look there is the place they laid him." I am sure the absence of Jesus's body left them breathless. But that is not the only revelation the messenger has for them. "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. "Of course they were afraid, their world had been turned upside down. Their beloved Jesus was first taken from them in death and now he has been taken from them once more. He has journeyed beyond death and left them behind so they must pursue him to Galilee.

The women realized they were in the midst of something more powerful than they could comprehend. Jesus could not be stopped by death, contained in a tomb, or held in any one place. The entire Gospel of Mark is Jesus racing ahead to the next thing, and even the aftermath of death and resurrection is no different.

It is our natural inclination to wish God were static and in one place, easily defined and understood. But our God will not be confined by the tomb or by the boxes in which we may wish to place the divine. We naturally wish to understand God, to understand how God became human, walked among us, died for

us, and then defeated death for all of us. But perhaps one of the gifts Easter and the gospel of Mark have to offer us is that human comprehension of such things cannot be assumed.

We are called to be in awe this morning. And we are called forward to lives that are deeper and wider than we have ever known before. We are being called out of the tomb, out of the boxes and limitations we have created, to join our God on the move forward. We do not necessarily need to understand it all to follow the resurrected Christ on to Galilee. Galilee was where Jesus ministry began and where he is always to be found, out ahead of us, teaching, and feeding, and healing, and conquering death in all its forms, that we might find our home in God.

I arrived at church one Saturday morning a few weeks ago, my head filled with the minutia of ministry. Checklists were passing before my eyes. So many things needed to be done. I was afraid something might be missed. After all, how could we ever be the church together unless we got all of these things done correctly?

I was the first one in the building so the first thing that needed to get done was to turn off the alarm. Upon entering the building there are a certain amount of seconds you have to punch in the code before the Ladue police show up on our doorstep. I always find the hasty walk and entering in of the correct digits a bit of an adrenaline rush. Thankfully my steps were quick enough and somehow my fingers dexterous enough to complete the task.

Whew. One small thing accomplished. But the checklist was quickly pulling itself up in my mind. So many things that

needed to be done to ensure that we were being the church. Then, my ears drew me away from my checklist. For some reason the radio was on in the little room where the alarm pad is located. And the radio was playing "Amazing Grace." In the empty building somehow the radio was on And those familiar words were being sung, "Tis grace has brought me safe thus far; And grace will lead me home." It was a simple thing but it took my breath away for a moment.

I was once again reminded that however diligent we are in seeking to do all the right things to be the church it is not really in our hands. God as always, was a step ahead of me, a step ahead of all of us. The completion of my checklist was not going to make sure we were the church together. God's loving grace had already accomplished that in ways beyond my understanding. It is not our actions that make us the church but God's grace that is ever before us. And it God's grace which will always lead us home. It is not we who have to understand the miracle of the resurrection to make it work. God will take care of that.

I was not the first one here that day and I never would be on any day. We can show up with all of the spices, ready for anointing, thinking we are the ones who need to make the church the church. But God is always out in front of us, defeating death, on the way to Galilee, teaching, feeding, and healing. We may never be able to quite catch up with the divine or understand how God defeats death but we can pause and be in awe of it all.

If the Hebrew language is right and there are only two kinds of fears, imaginary, and awe of the Lord, then there is nothing for us to ever fear, even death itself.

On this Easter Sunday we may not be able to grasp the enormity of the gift we are receiving but let us have a moment of awe for the one who travels before us, conquering death and inviting us beyond our every fear and worry into a deeper and wider life, an eternal life.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is correct, we do "beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." But our God is inviting us to leave the fears of the past behind and to step forward into the future, into the resurrection. Charles Dickens is correct as well, our God is inviting us to "a far, far better thing...and a far, far better rest than we have ever known." And Maurice Sendak does wisely remind us that no matter where our journeys take us in the end, we will indeed find ourselves in our very own room and supper waiting for us.

There is no fear to be found, except our awe for the Lord.

Let us come to the Lord's table and be fed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Lew, Allan, *Be Still and Get Going*, Little, Brown, and Company,
New York, 2005.