

“Words of Hope from an Empty Tomb”
Mark 16:1-8
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There’s really only one message that can be delivered on Easter. Life. Plainly and simply, life is what we celebrate with our remembrance of the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He who was dead is raised. We who were dead in sin are raised to new life in righteousness. As human beings, we are pretty well acquainted with the fact that life comes before death, but this morning, it seems appropriate to begin talking about death before life.

There was a lot of death in the news this week -- the half dozen or so murder-suicides in communities in Alabama, New York, Germany and other places, the devastating earthquake in Italy, the continuing tragedy in Darfur, and more roadside bombs in Afghanistan and Iraq to name but a few besides the mounting death toll during Semana Santa in Costa Rica. There were stories of life, but you had to work a lot harder to find them, and they probably weren’t told in such a compelling way. And each one of those stories of death, more than just captivating our attention, likely caused us to give a few minutes thought to our own deaths, or the deaths of those we know or love. Mortality checks, I like to call them.

Most of us probably aren’t too afraid of our own deaths as long as we can be assured that they will be peaceful and comfortable, at a ripe old age with family

gathered round, with goodbyes said, grudges buried, and grace experienced abundantly. We may not want to die, but at least it wouldn't be so bad under those circumstances. That picture of death doesn't scare us nearly as much as the one that shows us suffering, the one that has us in pain, or alone, or too young with too much left undone, or leaving people behind who are depending on us. And though it is an experience mercifully far beyond most of our imaginings, the most frightening picture of death is the one which has us at the wrong end of a machete, or a fist, or the barrel of a gun, our lives taken from us by someone without the right to do so, someone who thinks our life isn't worth as much as their own, or is less important than their own desires, or even their momentary state of mind.

Would that it were otherwise, even for Christians, but there is no more a guarantee of a good death than an uncomfortable or horrific one, and mercifully, no less of a guarantee. I cannot even begin to imagine the final moments of a fine Christian man I knew when I lived in Atlanta who was murdered in his hotel room while away on a business trip, far from family, far from having contributed all God had envisioned for him, leaving behind two teenaged children and a wife to receive a unexpected and devastating phone call. If there was someone who deserved such a death less, I don't know who it is. Cancer and other dread diseases strike young and old alike, children die in their cribs, drunken drivers steal away innocent lives. There is often no discernable connection between the quality of one's life and the manner of one's death. Witness the crucifixion of Jesus.

And yet, we do have some control over death, over how we approach it, and how we think about it, and how we deal with it. We do have the opportunity to positively affect some of the factors which might dictate our outcomes. We do have some control over the conditions which contribute to the most horrifying ways people die. We do have some say in the fortunes of death-dealing industries, and poorly-prioritized governments, and violence-glorifying media. We are not powerless with respect to death. You see, in the life that has been given to us by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, there is a charge to bring to the world that same life, the life experienced by the women who came to the tomb and learned, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.”

In shock, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome have come to the tomb to more fully experience death, the death of someone they loved. Yet in the process, they are confronted with not only a message about life, but life itself. The angel, that young man dressed in a white robe, blesses them by telling them that Jesus is alive, and even what to do with the news. But they, and the rest of the disciples will soon be blessed again by Christ with his promised presence, when they see him again in Galilee and from then on, they will never view death the same way again. Their orientation to the world is fundamentally changed. Forever after, these women, and all the disciples, instead of going *to* the tomb to

more fully experience death, will go forth *from* the tomb to more fully experience life. That's what happens when you experience the empty tomb.

The empty tomb is made possible, of course, by the resurrection, that foundational moment, that event above all others for Christians; it is our creation story as a people of faith. The story in Genesis is of the creation of the life of the whole world, but Christ's resurrection is the re-creation of that life in all its fullness, or at least the promise of re-creation. You will remember that the consequence of eating the apple from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was death. From that point on, death became our focus. After the garden, and with the exception of a few graceful moments, most of our efforts have been expended trying to forestall or defeat death on our own, even though we know it inevitably awaits us. Human beings have always gone, and are still willing to go, to any length, including causing the deaths of others, to try to prevent their own deaths. It is the very history of subjugation and oppression. So let us not confuse the urge to conquer or control others, or enrich or make ourselves comfortable, with seeking life. No, for the most part, these are futile but harmful efforts to fend off death, to perpetuate the illusion in our minds that we can live forever. The joke is on us, of course, because, as Jesus taught so well, there is no life to be found in the prevention of our own deaths. Rather, as we learn in Sunday School, it is when we seek to prevent the deaths of others, or put more positively, to help them to experience abundant life, no matter the cost to ourselves, that we find life. And this

is precisely what happens in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Jesus' ministry is not about saving himself, but others, so much so that he suffers the death he would save them from, the kind of horrifying, God-denying death we all fear so deeply.

Well, enough about death. Among the "good news" news stories of this week, the ones you had to dig a little deeper to find, was the story of Elwin Hope Wilson, a South Carolina man facing death who is just now finding life. Elwin Wilson was the poster child for the 1960s' Southern white racists, a man who in his youth threw melons at blacks walking down the street, smashed up the face of a seminary student, and pridefully kept a copy of a newspaper in which his photo appeared as part of a raging mob protesting sit-ins at the local lunch counter. In those days, Elwin Wilson probably thought he would live forever, and that the Kingdom of heaven would look as white as he was trying to keep his neighborhood. But these days, Elwin Wilson has experienced the empty tomb of Jesus Christ, as he contemplates his own grave. And so Wilson has spent recent months apologizing to "the people I had trouble with." He has embraced black men his own age, at the same lunch counter where once they were denied service and hauled off to jail as mobs of white youths, Wilson among them, threw insults and eggs and fists. Wilson has even carried his apology into black churches where he has unburdened it in prayer. And he has taken it to Washington, to the office of Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta, the civil rights leader whose face Wilson smashed at the Greyhound bus station during the famed Freedom Rides 48 years

ago. And why has he done all this? Well, he says, “All I can say is that it has bothered me for years, all the bad stuff I've done. And I found out there is no way I could be saved and get to heaven and still not like blacks.” One day a few years ago, Elwin Wilson sat down with his friend Clarence Bradley after a particularly depressing doctor's appointment, and they prayed together, and something happened. “Only God and Elwin know what's in his heart,” Bradley says. “But I can tell you something in that man changed that day.” Well, he may not know, but I have a suspicion that that something was the creation of a soul-sized empty tomb in his heart, opened there by the same God who opened the tomb on the first Easter day, and who brought life once again to Elwin Wilson and his community.

God is good. God is graceful. God gives us ways of focusing on life, like Easter. In ancient and pre-modern societies, festivals and annual celebrations were a human way to hearken back, in profoundly spiritual ways, to the gifts of the gods, whether those gifts were food, new technology, creation itself, or even the beginning of time. Specifically, New Year's celebrations were a time to reenact the moment of the divine creation of the world, to reach back and touch the gods and their new world when it was brand new, and pure, and strong, and vigorous. New Year's celebrations had the effect of wiping clean the slate of the old year, the exhausted creation, the used-up life of nature and humanity, and starting over at full strength. Though hundreds or thousands of years removed from such an understanding, we still retain something of that sensibility. Think no further than

our New Year's resolutions through which we believe we can go back to the way we were before our bad habits overwhelmed us. Think too about birthdays and wedding anniversaries. You see, all these celebrations aren't just about celebrating the passage of time, but more so about reclaiming the original moment they commemorate and recapturing the possibilities inherent in them -- new creation, new life, new relationship.

Think now about Easter. Think about the opportunity it presents to begin your life all over again, to reclaim the vitality of your spiritual life, to hearken back to when your faith burned brightly inside you, to get you on your feet again focusing on life, to make amends, to share your life, to do justice, love mercy, and humbly walk with God. You may be feeling depleted, but that's OK, because God makes provision on this Easter, just as on the first one. You see, at the moment when the faith of Mary Magdalene and the other Mary and the other disciples must have been nearly exhausted, they hear those words of hope that "He has been raised; he is not here" that reignited their capacity to love and serve God and one another. Easter is not the only time of the year we can go back to our roots, but it may be the best time. May the power of the empty tomb this Easter help you to find life, share it, and rejoice in it. Amen.