

FUNNY FEAR

Easter Sunday

April 1, 2018

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First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa

Text: Mark 16:1-8

SCRIPTURE

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, “Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 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.” 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.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God!

SERMON

Four or five years ago, Judy and I decided we would take a little vacation trip out to South Dakota, to the Badlands, the Black Hills National Forest, Mt. Rushmore, and Custer State Park. It was a great trip. The scenery is gorgeous. We encountered bison up close. We visited Wall Drug store. You have to do that if you go to South Dakota. There was just one thing we were not aware of when we were making our plans. We had scheduled this trip for the first week in August, staying for a few days in Rapid City, 30 miles south of Sturgis, SD.

This is significant because starting the first full weekend of August, Sturgis, SD, hosts the largest motorcycle rally in the world. They estimate that something like 600,000 to 700,000 people come to Sturgis. So during that week for 100 miles in any direction, there are bikers everywhere. We didn't think too much about it until we came down to breakfast one morning at the Holiday Inn Express where we were staying. We had just sat down with our waffles and oatmeal, when three big guys came walking in. All three wore these leather vests with a big emblem on the back that read “Hell's Angels—California” They were just the way you might imagine, with long hair and beards, scars and tattoos, big heavy boots and bandanas tied around their heads. They got what they wanted for breakfast, and then came and sat at the table right beside us.

Now, I like to think that I am a rational person, and not one to judge by outward appearances, but I have to admit it I was a little nervous. These were rather scary looking dudes. It was one thing in a crowded breakfast room of a Holiday Inn. It would be something else to encounter these guys alone in some deserted place. But fear is a funny thing. It can be overwhelming one minute, and in a flash it is gone completely. So we were sitting there, minding our own business, trying to act casual, when one of them elbows the other.

“Hey!” he says. “Knock, knock.”
“Who’s there?” His buddy answers.
“Banana.”
“Banana, who?”
“Knock, knock”
“Who’s there?”
“Banana.”
“Banana, who?”
“Knock, knock”
“Who’s there?”
“Banana.”
“Banana, who!?”
“Knock, knock”
“Who’s there!!?”
“Orange!”
“Orange, who?”
“Orange you glad I didn’t say ‘Banana’?”

And all three of these scary looking Hell’s Angels bikers burst out laughing as if it was the funniest joke they had ever heard. Meanwhile, Judy and I were avoiding eye contact with each other, and biting our lips to keep from laughing ourselves. All our uneasiness was gone. How could you be scared of these guys when there they were busting a gut laughing at a corny knock-knock joke that a five-year-old would tell? It was a very funny situation, both in the sense that it made you laugh, and in the sense that it was strange and weird.

Today is funny, in the sense that it is a bit strange and weird, because while it is Easter, the most important day in the year for all Christians, it is also April 1st, April Fool’s Day. The last time these two days came together was in 1956. It will happen again in 2029 and then again in 2040, but after that, not again until the next century. So here we are on a day that should be a day of wonder and worship but is also a day of jokes and gags.

Now I am not alone in thinking that as weird as it might seem to be, it is actually a wonderful connection to make. After all, the typical joke for April Fool’s Day is a prank or what we call a practical joke, something that fools or surprises someone. And it has been argued that the resurrection is the greatest prank of all times. Here are all the forces of evil, all the demonic powers, not to mention all those with political and religious power like Pilate and Caiaphas, they all think they have taken care of this Jesus of Nazareth. He is dead, buried and sealed in the tomb; end of story. But then Sunday morning comes along and, “April Fools!” The joke is on them. The lid is blown off, the stone is rolled away and suddenly everything is out of control.

This raises an interesting question of just what makes something funny. Why do we laugh at the thought of nasty looking bikers, eating toaster waffles and telling knock-knock jokes? For that matter, what makes any joke funny in the first place. Well, psychologist and neuroscientists have actually studied the brain in reaction to humor, along with other emotions to see if they could get some scientific data to explain what makes something funny. They did brain scans on people while telling them jokes. What they realized was the neurons of the brain made similar patterns when someone was laughing, as when they were figuring out the solution to a puzzle. They call this the “kick of discovery.” It is the good feeling you have when you realize something new. So what makes something funny is when we start thinking one way and suddenly discover the situation is completely different. Judy and I thought these bikers could be dangerous. When they started laughing at a very silly knock-knock joke, we discovered the situation was completely different.

If this kick of discovery is really the foundation of all humor, then the Bible is actually a very funny book. From cover to cover there are dozens of stories where we are set up to think one way, only to discover the situation is completely different. God promises Abraham and Sarah that their descendants will be a great

nation, but year after year they have no children. Finally, when Sarah is 90... 90! She becomes pregnant, and she actually does say, "Is this some kind of joke?" Then there is the one how God calls out from a burning bush to a shepherd wandering around in the desert and tells him that he will set his people free. Moses replies "Me? Take on the Egyptian Empire? That's a good one, God! Very funny!" Or a little kid from someplace called Bethlehem agrees to fight an oversized professional warrior named Goliath, who reacts with laughter and disbelief, "Are you kidding me? This is the best the Israel army has to offer?" All the great stories of the Bible, Joshua and the walls of Jericho, Jonah and the big fish, Daniel in the lions' den, they all have this kick of discovery, where you are set up to think one thing is going to happen and you discover something else entirely. Which brings us to our text for this morning... Most Bible scholars agree that Mark is the earliest gospel, written before Matthew, Luke, or John. So we read the earliest written account of what happened on that morning. Most of us are familiar with the story. Late on Friday afternoon, after Jesus had died, a man named Joseph of Arimathea had taken the body off of the cross and laid it in a tomb. At sundown it was considered to be the Sabbath, so nothing more was done to the body. Early on Sunday morning, three women come with spices to embalm the body. The way the story goes is setting us up to expect some very ordinary mundane things are going to happen. These women are worried about removing the stone covering of the tomb. Did they have enough strength? They didn't think so. Could they find someone to help them? That was what they were anticipating. It was all very, very ordinary.

But getting some muscle to assist them was totally irrelevant. Something else entirely had taken place. The stone was rolled away. The tomb was empty... well, other than instead of a dead body there was a young man, dressed in white, telling them Jesus is gone. He is not dead, but alive, and not just alive but on the move. He is going on ahead of them.

Now, I don't know if you remember but there is some controversy surrounding this ending to Mark's gospel. Most of the earliest manuscripts we have, end with verse 8, end with the words: "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." And that is then end of the story. Mark does not end his gospel with any appearance of the risen Christ. There is no walk to Emmaus, no appearance to Doubting Thomas, no reconciliation with Peter, and no Jesus ascending into heaven. Mark ends his gospel with three women freaking out and running away in terror from the empty tomb. That's it. That's the end.

This ending has been troubling to lots of people, stirring up a lot of debate. Some say that there probably was more to the ending but the last page of the original manuscript was torn away and lost. Others say the author may have been interrupted. Maybe he died or was arrested by the Roman authorities before he had a chance to finish. Others even say that this ending is evidence that the earliest Christians did not actually believe in a physical resurrection of Jesus, although that seems unlikely to me because there are a number of places in Mark's gospel where Jesus tells the disciples again and again that he is going to suffer and die in Jerusalem, only to rise again on the third day.

But, if this is indeed the way Mark intended his story to end, then it leaves us rather uneasy. It is like a piece of music that does not have a resolution but ends in what seems to be the middle of the tune. It is like a television series that ends its season with a cliff hanger, so that you will be eager to watch it again in a few months. It is like a joke that is missing the punchline. There has got to be something more. Things are not going the way these women have anticipated, but at the same time, they have not yet experienced the kick of discovery. They are not laughing at the end of Mark's gospel, rather they are running away in fear.

So what is going on? How do we make sense of all this? As I said, fear is a funny thing. One of the things you will often hear is that you must face your fears. What that means is that fear is not as overwhelming if you can specifically name what makes you afraid. Once you realize what is causing this fear it loses some of its power, for you better understand what is going on and what can be done.

So, just what was it that made these women so frightened? Some have said it was the whole creepy dead person coming out of the grave thing. Others have said that the women might have been afraid that Jesus was angry,

because he had been deserted at his hour of greatest need. Still others have said they were afraid that no one would believe their story because they were women. It may be some of all of those things, but I think what frightened them the most was that they suddenly realized that their relationship with Jesus had radically changed forever. When Jesus was alive, they loved him. He was their teacher, their friend, their spiritual guide. When Jesus died on the cross, they grieved. On this first morning of the week they were working through their grief, hoping to care for his body. They knew how to relate to a dead Jesus. A living Jesus they could love. A dead Jesus they could mourn. But what do you do with a risen Jesus? What happens now? They had absolutely no idea. Of all the fears we face, the greatest fear is the unknown, when we have no idea what to expect. That is the most overwhelming fear of all.

If this is indeed what they were afraid of, how do we make any sense of Mark's gospel? How do we find any sort of resolution? What is the punchline? The key is to be found in what the messenger tells them: "Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Look, there is the place they laid him. 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." The important line in this message is the phrase, he is going ahead of you to Galilee. Now, why Galilee? Why doesn't Jesus meet them in the upper room, or in the garden of Gethsemane or on the Mount of Olives? Why doesn't Jesus want them to meet in the temple and they will show Caiaphas and Pilate who he really is? What is the significance of Galilee?

Well, that is where Mark's gospel begins. Mark does not begin his story in Bethlehem or in Jerusalem or any part of Judea. No, he starts it all off in Galilee. In the very first chapter, after a brief description of Jesus being baptized and tempted in the wilderness, Mark tells us, "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.'" Go back to Galilee to get some good news, the messenger says. What is this good news? The kingdom of God, the Beloved Community is here, now, with us. That is the punchline. That is the kick of discovery. This means you have to keep on reading through Mark as Jesus shows us, what the arrival of God's Beloved Community entails. As we read we see the sick are healed, sins are forgiven, demons are sent packing, the blind can see, the lame can walk, the hungry are fed, storms are calmed, and God's love flows in and through us bringing us together, closer to God, closer to one another.

For Mark, the resurrection is not so much about a body coming out of the tomb, a body that you can see and touch. No, resurrection is so much more. Resurrection is the good news of a whole new relationship we can now have with God, a relationship that draws us up from the dark hopelessness of this sad and sinful world. Resurrection changes everything, so that anything is possible. Resurrection is the kick of discovery that we have nothing to fear, because not even the horror of the cross can extinguish the light of God's love. If we are a bit confused by what this all means, Mark sends us back to Galilee, back to the beginning to read it all again, to listen to the story one more time, the story of the good news of God's love.

So on this April Fool's Day-Easter Sunday, it is very appropriate that we read from Mark's gospel. Because while it is rather corny and quirky and a weird thing to say, one way of looking at it is as a big knock-knock joke. Shall we try it?

Hey choir: Knock, knock. "Who's there?" "The tomb is empty. Go back to Galilee."

Hey Left side: Knock, knock. "Who's there?" "The tomb is empty. Go back to Galilee."

Hey right side: Knock, knock. "Who's there?" "The tomb is empty. Go back to Galilee."

Hey church: Knock, knock. "Who's there?" "Orange" "Orange who?" "Orange you glad that Christ is risen?"
"He is risen indeed!"

And those of us who long for God's Beloved Community, those who love Jesus, those of us who have heard some good news, we bust a gut with laughter and indescribable joy and our "Ha-ha-ha-hallelujahs!" As we answer back with that wonderful kick of discovery, "He is risen, indeed!" Thanks be to God! In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.