

Mark 16: 1-8

16 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. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ They had been saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” ⁴ When they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had already been rolled back. ⁵ As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man, dressed in a white robe, sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. ⁶ 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. ⁷ 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.” ⁸ 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.

Trinity Presbyterian Church
April 1, 2018—Easter Sunday

“Showing Up to the Jam Session”

The women at the tomb reminds me of a new series on Netflix called *Godless*. It is a western type show about a town whose population consists of all women because the men died in a mining accident. There is a scene where the women are gathered at the town cemetery to grieve the death of a young man who violently died. It is graveside that these words are read:

“’Tis a fearful thing to love what death can touch.
A fearful thing to love, to hope, to dream, to be—
to be,
And oh, to lose.
A thing for fools, this,
And a holy thing,
a holy thing to love.
For your life has lived in me,
your laugh once lifted me,
your word was gift to me.
To remember this brings painful joy.
’Tis a human thing, love,
a holy thing, to love what death has touched.”¹

¹ This is a poem from the 12th century Jewish poet Yehuda HaLevi (or Judah “the priest”). The poem is entitled, “’Tis A Fearful Thing.”

The words are piercing because we know death is real. "'Tis a fearful thing, a holy thing, to love what death can touch." We've all sat in church pews at a loved one's funeral. We've heard the highlights of their life spoken from the pulpit. We remember their laugh, the things they said and did that made them who they were. The painful joy the memories bring. 'Tis a fearful thing, death. Most of us, if we're honest, will be fearful when our hour comes. As the saying goes, "When death comes knocking at the front door, we are going to slip out the back door." We fear for ourselves and perhaps for what will happen to those we leave behind. We fear because we love—we love the gift of life, the gift of our people, the gift of all the sweet moments that have slipped by far too quickly. Heard a story about a woman who got a grim diagnosis. She said after she shared the news with her friends and family, her best friend stopped returning her phone calls. Finally, she got ahold of her friend who said, "I'm sorry. I just can't bear the thought of losing you." We all know the reality of death is worthy of our fear. 'Tis a fearful thing, a holy thing, to love what death can touch.

Yet, God *has also touched death*, we say. God has reached down and lifted up the one who died at the merciless hand of the empire. And like the women at the empty tomb we wonder, "What does it mean?" While resurrection is a mystery, there are two sides to resurrection's coin we can name. First, in raising Jesus God affirms the message that Jesus brought: The Kingdom of God is now, and right here among us. It means God affirms the life Jesus lived. In raising Jesus God affirms our life and the life of every woman, man, child, and creature on this earth. The second part is that in Christ's resurrection God denounces the systems of power which perpetuate cycles of death and injustice. You see, it would have been one thing to bring Jesus back to life after he died in his sleep—like Lazarus. It would be a blow against death itself. But it is an entirely other thing to bring Jesus back to life *after he has been crucified, dead and buried at the hands of the empire*. It not only strikes a blow to death, but to the system of injustice which manufactures death and strips others of their dignity.

So when Jesus lifts up those considered "less than" by dominant society, we are asked to do the same because that is what God desires for the world to look like. Because Jesus is alive after being crucified, the church must do whatever it can to make equality a reality. Because he is alive justice is not an elective, but a prerequisite to understanding who and what and how God functions in our world. Because he is alive the church stands with those high school kids who marched and said, "Never Again!" to gun violence. Because God says "Never Again" is meaningless death going to be the end of the story. "Never Again!" will fear be the force that drives our core values. "Never Again!" will sickness or war or an AR-15 get to proclaim the final word on our lives. God has touched death and in raising the Crucified One God affirms Jesus' life, which means God affirms our life. Which means we work to affirm the life of every woman, man, child and creature on this earth—from the least among us to the greatest.

So now, did you notice there is a command in the text? “Go tell” the world about Jesus being alive. I’m not convinced we feel comfortable talking about resurrection, but that is the command we are given. So how does such good news spread?

A couple months ago, I was at a local brew pub where there happened to be a folky jam session taking place. I guess here in the South they are a thing. Saw about twenty people or so people sitting in a big circle. There were guitars and ukuleles, fiddles and flutes. Even a Triangle player, because the group doesn’t discriminate.² They were going around the circle calling out different tunes one at a time. Then someone would count it off and off they’d go as others would eventually stumble in. After they played through the tune a few times, someone would jump up and take a solo and then someone else. Just when you thought the song was about to end, someone else would pop up taking a solo. This procedure goes on for a while, but everyone is having a good time, so nobody cares. Now, I’m sitting on the outside looking in on all of this and I notice that there are some people in the circle that don’t know the song. Some of them are putting the instrument close to their ear trying to pluck out the tune by ear. Some would elbow a neighbor to ask for help and their neighbor would stop what they are doing to show them. And after a while, some were able to play along and participate. If not, they just sat and listened while sipping on their drink. It didn’t matter if they knew the song or not, every one of them still belonged in the circle.

For some reason it made me think of the church and how the gospel music spreads. We keep the jam session going. We keep playing through the same old tunes, telling the same old stories and after a while the melodies become a part of us. And then we spread the love around, so others are included, and then they become a part of us too. Everyone belongs—even the Triangle players. But you see, no one is going to be a part of anything unless someone is willing to share the music with them.

Somehow, we are all in charge of sharing the song. Nobody gets a deferral. Can’t leave it up to the preacher’s sermon. It’s not up to the choir’s “Hallelujahs.” It’s up to all of us whose lives have been touched by the fearful thing that God’s promises are true. You’re here because you belong to the jam session. And it’s only a matter of time before you’ll be expected to share the good news music with someone else, so the circle of love and justice grows bigger.

² The instruments named here, including the Triangle, were adjusted to fit the instruments who would be playing the Communion Hymn, replicating a “jam session.”